

*Sunstruck
Blossoms*

 teyatfemslash

A SFW Genshin Impact Femslash Zine

Table of contents

writing

- 03. *This Ocean We Call Home* by Ama
- 35. *Drunken Dreams of Storm-Wrought Beginnings* by Cadriona
- 69. *Motivations* by Cat_unicreating
- 81. *Off Guard* by crescenttwins
- 107. *at noon a darkness fell* by Eternitas
- 149. *salt and shark teeth* by Mina
- 165. *primavera* by Rii
- 207. *A Lesson in Leisure Time* by Seraphina

artwork

- 80. *Beidou/Ganyu* by Mixedsnack Cho
- 106. *Eula/Barbara* by Knightly
- 148. *Xiangling/Keqing* by Midori
- 164. *Yanfei/Hu Tao* by Midori
- 206. *Lumine/Shenhe* by Kaonee_888
- 219. *Shenhe/Yun Jin* by Sel
- 220. *Cover Art* by DaaiZefU





This Ocean We Call Home

by Ama | ship: Beidou/Kokomi

content tags: mentions of death

Beidou could feel the hairs stand up on the back of her neck as the skies darkened.

The salty wind of the sea that just moments ago blew gently onto Beidous skin was now burning her eyes and sending her hair flying in all sorts of directions. Her hands tightened onto the rungs of the ship's wheel as she continued to sail straight through the open ocean. As the ocean's waves slowly grew more turbulent, Beidou turned to her navigator who was standing nearby.

"Huixing. What're the charts reading?" Beidou asked.

"We seem to have gone a bit off course," Huixing explained, her finger dragging across her nautical map. "But if we head east we should be-"

Huixings words were abruptly cut off as a large bolt of lightning struck the ocean just a few feet away from the Alcor. The shock from the lightning caused the

Alcor to roll violently, with those on board getting knocked off their feet. Beidou quickly pushed herself up to resume control of the helm, but the wheel was already spinning out of control.

"MEN!" Beidou shouted as she desperately tried to fight back against the helm. "Batten down the hatches- NOW!" By now the waves were coming in at full force, the water rising high above the sides of the ship before crashing down on the deck.

By now Huixing and other crew that made up the shield of the Crux ran inside the forecastle, taking refuge in the crew's quarters. This left the rest of the Crux's sailors up on the deck, scrambling around trying to help the captain steady the ship. But as more bolts of lightning crashed down onto the water around them, the Alcor became near impossible to control.

Soaked and losing her balance, Beidou became desperate in her attempts to keep the Alcor afloat. In her countless years of sailing with the Crux, she's never faced a storm so fierce. And the few times the Alcor did find itself in the middle of a storm, Beidou and her immense strength were able to steer the ship to safety.

This time, however, Beidou was powerless against these treacherous waters.

“How can I lose here? How can I let my crew be put in so much danger? Maybe... maybe ‘Beidou does control death’” Beidou almost lost herself in those words as they reverberated in her head.

For the first time since the storm began, Beidou stepped away from the helm and took in her surroundings. A few crew members had become injured and were being treated by the medical staff on board. Parts of the Alcor even began breaking due to the sheer force of the waves.

Suddenly Beidou was snapped out of her trance when the mainmast was struck by a bolt of lightning. The large wooden pole was cut clean in half and began to fall in Beidou’s direction. Although she had enough time to move out of the way, the force from the mast crashing down on the deck sent her flying.

“AGH” Beidou screamed as her body hit the floor of the deck.

After a moment she was able to stand up, using the ship’s rail to steady herself. Beidou could feel her head pounding and her limbs becoming weak. But she barely had time to catch her breath as another large bolt of lightning struck down from the sky. The lightning landed mere inches away from Beidou, hitting part of the ship’s railing with a loud crack.

Beidou barely had time to react before the railing she leaned on gave way and broke off, causing her to fall back and overboard. She felt paralyzed in shock as she dived headfirst into the sea, losing consciousness once her body hit the water.

~

Hmmm... Hm hm hmm...

Beidou slowly opened her eyes as the sound of humming filled her ears. Her vision was blurred as she struggled to gain consciousness. But what she did see when she came to caused her to gasp in shock.

With the sun burning in her eyes, Beidou found herself laying down in the sand by the shore. And leaning over her was a strange girl, the source of the humming. The girl had long light hair and a pair of purple eyes that Beidou found herself getting lost in. She almost looked angelic... like an angel that saved Beidou from the brink of death.

“A-ah... you’re awake!” the girl spoke quietly.

“Huh?” Beidou squinted her eyes. “Who are you?”

“My name is Sangonomiya Kokomi. I saw you um-

passed out... So I had to make sure you were okay and tend to your injuries."

"Passed out where?" Beidou asked as she tried sitting up, a sharp pain rushing to her head. She winced as Kokomi placed a hand on her shoulder, motioning her to lay back down.

"You shouldn't sit up so quickly, you just recovered from some serious injuries and need your rest," Kokomi advised.

Beidou let out a sigh as she lay back down on the sand. Not only was her head hurting, but she also could barely move her right arm. Beidou definitely was in rough shape, but considering the fact she went overboard in the middle of a storm, she was surprised she survived at all.

"All I remember..." Beidou began. "Was being knocked off the Alcor, my ship. How exactly did you find me?"

Kokomi became visibly nervous, shifting her gaze to the side. Beidou could tell that something was off and taking a closer look at Kokomi as she sat beside her only raised more questions. Kokomi was only visible from her midriff and up, with her lower body being hidden behind some debris on the shoreline.

"I was in the ah- I saw you floating in the water on top of a large piece of wood. It seemed to be from the boat

that you mentioned—" Kokomi stammered.

"Were you also on a boat? Or did you happen to be swimming... in the middle of the ocean?"

"I..."

"On the topic of water... Kokomi, is my vision playing tricks on me, or are you sitting in the water as we speak?"

A light red color flushed over Kokomi's cheeks as she let out a slight gasp. She nearly looked like she was about to cry, it almost made Beidou feel bad for asking so many questions. Just as Beidou was ready to apologize for her nosiness, Kokomi let out a deep breath before speaking up, this time more confidently.

"I suppose... I can't hide it any longer."

Beidou tried sitting up again, this time being helped up by the girl who only moments before pushed her back to lay down. Looking Beidou in the eyes, Kokomi shifted her body to the side so that she was fully visible.

Shining through the clear ocean water was what appeared to be a long fishtail. Blue and purple scales covered the tail in a gradient pattern, the sunlight reflecting off them. This tail however didn't belong to

a fish of some kind, it seemed to belong to Kokomi.

“Is that...” Beidou spoke silently, her mouth open slightly agape.

“Yes. This is my tail, I am a mermaid.” Kokomi nervously smiled as she moved her tail around, letting the large fin at the end of it flip back and forth.

Kokomi’s anxious eyes pierced into the captain’s, waiting for any kind of response. Beidou tried her best to wipe all signs of shock off her face, not wanting Kokomi to take it as a bad sign. She wasn’t shocked in a judgemental way like Kokomi seemed to fear. Beidou was just surprised that in all her years at sea this was the first time she’s seen an actual mermaid. But she couldn’t just tell Kokomi that, Beidou struggled to find the right words.

“That’s honestly pretty cool,” Beidou remarked. “Being able to swim into the deepest parts of the ocean... sounds amazing, almost makes me jealous.” The captain ended her words with a chuckle.

“Really?” Kokomi asked, tilting her head to the side as she fiddled with a strand of her hair. Beidou responded with a simple nod. Her silent confirmation was enough to make Kokomi smile again, this time with joy instead of with nervousness.

“Usually when people see me, or my tail rather, they get frightened. Even people I’ve healed would scuttle away when they realized I was a mermaid. They’d even accuse me of being a siren and cursing them...” Kokomi’s somber eyes lit up as she looked at Beidou. “I was worried you would-”

“Be scared of you?” Beidou laughed again, this time louder and with more amusement. “I’m a tough girl, faced off against my fair share of sea monsters. You are definitely no monster, besides...”

Fighting off the pain from her sore body, Beidou moved closer, shifting herself through the sand so that she was sitting beside Kokomi.

“You saved me, right?” Beidou asked softly.

Kokomi could feel her cheeks grow warm as she let her apprehension melt away. It wasn’t often that she would get thanked for healing the many injured humans that crossed her path. She never healed others for praise, praise felt like something she didn’t deserve.

But Beidou’s words, her tone, it felt so genuine. As much as Kokomi wanted to hang on to the feeling these words gave her, she also found herself craving the coming gratitude that Beidou looked ready to spill out.

"I did. You were barely clinging on to life... I brought you here to heal as quickly as I could." Kokomi answered.

"You didn't have to do that, you know? Could have left me out there to die, but you went out of your way to save me. You're no siren, you're a saint. I know we just met and all but I can tell you're a great person. I owe you my life, truly."

"T-Thank you..." Kokomi spoke as she blinked away the blissful tears that began to form in her eyes. "Ah- I don't think I got your name?"

"Beidou. Well, I usually go by Captain but you can just call me Beidou."

"Of course, Thank you Beidou."

As the two girls fell silent, their eyes turned toward the open ocean. The bright blue sky that cast over the water was now showing faint streaks of yellow and orange, the earliest signs of the sun preparing to set. Beidou could feel her stomach begin to rumble as the change from day to evening instinctively reminded her of dinner.

That's when the thought of being stranded really started to set in for Beidou. What was she supposed to eat? Especially when the sandy beach she found

herself on seemed to stretch on for miles. She could go more inland to find some sort of source of food, but that seemed like a gamble considering she had no idea what lay beyond this beach. And the only person she had to ask was Kokomi, who had obviously never stepped onto land herself.

"So... uh, you think there's anything around here I could eat?" Beidou asked, feeling a bit embarrassed by her wording. "Like any fruit trees or plants? Or some sort of animal I could hunt down? I mean... I get it if you don't know-"

"I can catch you a fish if you'd like," Kokomi interrupted.

"Really? You're okay with me... killing and eating a fish?"

Kokomi let out a giggle at the sight of Beidou's cheeks glowing red. Not only to try to cut through the tension that suddenly formed between them, but also in genuine amusement at Beidou's sensitive approach to this topic.

"I'm a mermaid, not a fish. Although I refrain from eating fish myself, we see them as you humans see boars," Kokomi explained softly. "Besides, you need nutrition. I just wish I could help out more with

preparing and cooking the food... especially since your arm is still healing."

"Heh, I see. No need to worry about me though, I've worked through my fair share of injuries." Beidou responded as she used her working arm to push herself up to stand. "I can still go find some wood and start a fire without straining my bum arm."

"Okay just... be careful, please. I'll be back in a moment" Kokomi moved back deeper in the water until her tail couldn't touch the ocean floor. She gave a quick nod before diving underwater and swimming into the sea's depths.

"Make sure to catch me a real whopper, girls gotta eat!" Beidou called out playfully.

Scanning her surroundings, Beidou set her sights on a palm tree planted near the northernmost edge of the beach. She took the minute-long trek towards the tree and picked up part of a branch and some twigs from the ground. Once Beidou was back to her spot by the shore she arranged the wood in a pile and began the tedious process of rubbing two twigs together to start a fire.

~

"Aha!"

Beidou's eyes went wide with excitement as she created a spark, gradually growing into bright flames as the heat spread through the pile of wood. She sat and poked at the fire with a stick until she saw the water splashing in the ocean out of the corner of her eye. Her sights were fully drawn to the ocean as Kokomi suddenly emerged from underwater, holding a large fish in her hands.

"Seems I've come back just in time," Kokomi smiled as she glanced at the fire. She slowly moved closer to the edge of the shore, trying to prevent any water from splashing towards the flames. "I hope this fish is sufficient enough."

"Ay, nice catch!" Beidou praised as she stood up to walk towards Kokomi, taking the fish from her hands.

The fish started to flop around in Beidou's grasp as it struggled to breathe in air. Beidou was quick to act, shoving her thumb into the fish's mouth and slamming it down onto a nearby rock. After preparing the fish to be eaten, she grabbed a large stick and skewered the fish through its mouth and out by its back fin.

Kokomi couldn't help but glance away from where Beidou was preparing the fish. Although she was completely fine with seeing others eat fish, she always

felt uncomfortable with seeing them killed. To her, respect must be given to the will of every creature, including even the smallest of fish. But that respect must also extend to humans as well, it wouldn't be respectful of her to inhibit Beidou's will to kill a creature for food. Besides, Kokomi felt responsible for Beidous health as the one who healed her. The protein gained from eating fish will certainly benefit Beidous sore and recovering body.

With fish skewer in hand, Beidou got up and moved to sit back down in her spot beside the fire. She held her good arm, holding one end of the stick out towards the fire, keeping the fish hovering just above the highest peaks of the flames.

Kokomi sat at the edge of the shore, mesmerized by the dancing flames as the wood burning beneath them crackled and popped. It wasn't often she was able to see fire, and as much as she wanted to come closer to feel the heat emanating from it, she physically couldn't.

As long as her fin remained in the water, she was able to be above the surface for as long as she pleased. But the moment her entire body was out of the water, she wouldn't be able to breathe. Gasping and thrashing about in a similar manner to the fish she caught for Beidou before it was put out of its misery.

It was a fate Kokomi had long accepted, but having to keep her distance from humans was never easy. Especially if said humans captivated her as much as Beidou did, a realization she made the moment she saw Beidou floating lifeless in the middle of the ocean.

"-Kokomi?"

The mermaid snapped out of her daze as she heard her name being called out to her.

"Mm? Did you say something?" Kokomi asked, a bit frazzled.

"Yeah, I was just saying how delicious this tastes," Beidou spoke in between bites of grilled fish. "Thank you, again."

"Of course. I'm glad you are enjoying it."

Beidou nodded in response as she continued to eat. Due to how hungry she was, Beidou found herself scarfing down the grilled fish as fast as she could. Even so, she still tried to be careful of any bones or other parts of the fish that she shouldn't eat. The only time she slowed down was when Kokomi spoke to her

"Say, Beidou. I know you mentioned being on a ship before I found you out at sea. I'm curious, where were

you going? And for what, if you don't mind sharing?" Kokomi asked.

"Aye, The ship I was on was my own, The Alcor." Beidou explained. "I was sailing with my crew, The Crux, back to Liyue from a routine trade route to Inazuma. But somehow... we got caught in a vicious storm."

"Mm, so you didn't make it far then, as this beach here is just off the coast of Inazuma."

"Guess I didn't," Beidou let out a sigh. "Did you... happen to see anyone else in or around the water when you found me? Anyone from my crew?"

"No, I'm afraid not"

Beidou took another bite of fish, staring down at the fire intensely with a distraught look on her face. She set her fish skewer to the side, which barely had any meat left on it. But Beidou couldn't bring herself to finish it off, as her worry made her unable to stomach another bite.

"Gods- They're probably all dead or something. All because of me-" Beidou spoke angrily.

"They could still be alive," Kokomi interrupted. "They could have washed up on land somewhere or were

found by another boat."

"That's... possible. But either way, It was all my fault they ended up in this mess. All because I couldn't control my own damn ship."

"Beidou, don't say that-"

"Why not? It's true! My crew is like family to me, It's my responsibility as captain to make sure they're safe while out at sea. I failed them, I failed myself."

Kokomi could almost feel a twinge of pain in her chest, seeing Beidou so upset had hurt her more than she could have ever expected. She wanted so badly to crawl out of the water and be by Beidou's side. She knew this kind of turmoil was why she vowed to never become close to humans, but damn did Beidou grow on her more than any other human ever had. Kokomi had to do something, something to bring Beidou closer.

The fire that was starting to wind down was put out completely as Kokomi sent a big splash of water onto the flames. It was the only thing she could think of at the moment to get Beidous attention.

"Hey! Why did you-" Beidou looked up in surprise.

"Beidou. Come here, please." Kokomi softly demanded.

Beidou sat still for a moment, unsure of what Kokomi could have wanted. Regardless, she got up and walked towards the shore where Kokomi was, sitting on the sand beside her.

"Listen," Kokomi began, looking Beidou in the eyes. "You can't blame yourself like this. That storm was enough to tear your ship to shreds. You did the best you could, and even if there were casualties... I'm sure they were still grateful for your efforts."

"But... how can I live with myself, even if it was just one member of my crew that died from the wreck?" Beidou asked, her voice becoming low and showing hints of distress. "...one is still too many."

Kokomi sat still for a moment, her gaze shifting away from Beidou for a split second as she peered out over the ocean. The waves were calm, with the water reflecting the sunset's deep orange color. This soothing sight was enough to refresh Kokomi's mind as she spoke up to break the silence.

"You know Beidou, there's a tale that has been passed down by us mermaids for generations." Kokomi began, nudging Beidou so that she too was looking out over the ocean. "That whenever a human dies out at sea, they become reborn into a mermaid. Going on to spend their days swimming in the ocean they loved so much in their past lives."

"Wait, does that mean- you?" Beidou interrupted.

A warm smile spread over Kokomi's face as she let out a giggle.

"I mean, it's merely a legend. The kind of belief that one can find comfort in when faced with the stark reality of death. A reality we mermaids face whenever we come across the bodies of those who lost their lives to the sea. But I think it can also bring comfort to you as well... believing your crew will come back to call the ocean their home..."

Beidou felt a content smile begin to spread across her face, finally able to find some semblance of peace within herself. She almost felt like she could cry, but even in the most sincere of moments, the captain wasn't one to shed tears. Instead, she turned to look at Kokomi, whose light hair began to glow as the setting sun's rays reflected onto it.

"Kokomi... I-" Beidou spoke softly. "I think that's beautiful..."

'Almost as beautiful as you' Beidou immediately thought to herself.

"You think so?" Kokomi asked as she tilted her head to the side.

Beidou could only respond with a nod as she felt her face redden. She hated feeling flustered like this, but luckily she wouldn't be stuck with this feeling for long.

As the ocean's tide suddenly shifted, the water rushed further up the shore. Beidou was originally sitting just by the edge of the water, as close as she could get to Kokomi without getting wet. But now the tide had rushed past where Beidou sat, making her legs and rear wet.

For most, getting your clothes wet is an unpleasant feeling. But for Beidou, someone who loved the sea, it was almost soothing to her.

"Ah, the water feels so nice," Beidou said as she looked down at the tide moving around her.

"It does, I love how warm it gets around sunset!" Kokomi spoke excitedly before extending her hand out toward Beidou. "Care for a swim?"

Beidou stared at Kokomi's hand for a moment, noting how fair and delicate it was. She was almost worried that the callouses on her own hands would be too rough against Kokomi's soft skin. However, that thought quickly was cast aside as Beidou placed her hand on top of Kokomi's and squeezed it lightly.

"I'd love to..." Beidou responded, quickly slipping out

of her shoes.

Kokomi let go of Beidou's hand for a split second as she backed up further into the water, watching as Beidou stood up and followed her deeper into the ocean. As soon as Beidou was deep enough in the water she wasted no time in grabbing onto Kokomi's hand again.

The two went a bit further into the ocean, until Beidou was just able to float, while still being shallow enough to stand if she needed. Kokomi slipped her hand away again and started swimming around Beidou in a circle.

Beidou could only observe in awe as she watched Kokomi's tale wave up and down as she raced around underwater. She almost felt like a wimp for wading her arms around in place, but Beidou definitely wasn't up for swimming laps against a mermaid.

After a bit Kokomi popped up from underwater, accidentally splashing Beidou in the face as she came up a bit too close. Before Kokomi could apologize, Beidou started laughing.

"Well at least I didn't have my mouth open, could never get used to the taste of saltwater." Beidou joked.

"You would if you lived in it," Kokomi giggled.

"Guess I'd have to huh?"

Beidou smiled as she moved a bit in the water, now standing with her body from the shoulders down underwater. The sand beneath her feet was soft as it pushed through the cracks of her toes. This, and the lukewarm temperature of the water felt so luxurious to her. Beidou was admittedly a bit hesitant to get back in the water after being thrown overboard, but nothing could ever make her resist the call of the sea. Especially since she now had someone to enjoy it with.

Seeing Kokomi in her element, in her home, was such a heart-warming sight for Beidou. Just earlier in the day, Kokomi was so self-conscious about revealing this part of herself, but now she was practically dragging Beidou into the water with her. It was such a stark yet pleasant evolution.

"Hm? Beidou?" Kokomi spoke out, trying to get the captain's attention.

"Oh- sorry, I was just..." Beidou quickly snapped out of her daze and turned to look at Kokomi. "Enjoying the view."

"It's captivating isn't it?" Kokomi looked up at the sky, studying the hues of reddish-pink that subtly spread out across the darkening sky.

The mermaid's gaze then quickly shifted as she swam a bit closer to Beidou so that she was right in front of her.

"The beautiful shades of pink in the sky..." Kokomi spoke as she reached out towards Beidou's face, brushing away her bangs that were covering her left eye. "they're almost the same color as your eyes."

"Kokomi..." Beidou whispered as tilted her head to the side, leaning into Kokomi's touch.

Kokomi kept her palm open as she slid her hand down Beidou's face, resting it on her cheek. Beidou stood still, feeling a bit apprehensive. There were so many things she wanted to do in this moment, so many ways to make Kokomi feel as cared for as she has made Beidou feel.

"There's, ah, a scratch on your face-" Kokomi blurted out, sensing Beidou's creeping apprehension.

"Hey," Beidou interrupted, reaching towards Kokomi and pulling her in by her waist. "No need to make excuses. I know you're anxious, but you can relax around me.

Kokomi let out a soft gasp as she glanced down at the water's surface. She took a moment before bringing herself closer to Beidou and wrapping her arms around her neck. Beidou couldn't help but smile once Kokomi looked back up and locked eyes with her.

"There we go," Beidou praised as she leaned forward to

press her forehead against Kokomi's.

Despite the voice screaming in her head to look away, to give in to her anxieties, Kokomi couldn't pull her gaze away from Beidou. She felt so... safe in her arms. Every worry, every doubt quickly melted away as Kokomi moved closer, nearly pressing her chest against Beidou. Even with all her walls broken down, Kokomi had one last barrier holding her back.

"Can I... kiss you?" Kokomi asked, a hint of confidence in her words.

"Please—" Beidou breathed out.

With her inhibitions fully melted away, Kokomi leaned in and quickly pressed her lips against Beidou's. Kokomi slid her hands from where they rested around Beidou's neck and placed them on each of Beidou's cheeks. Not being able to get enough of her warmth, Beidou pulled Kokomi in as much as she could so the two girls were fully pressed together in their embrace.

Even though Kokomi never kissed anybody like this before, let alone a human, she felt like she somehow knew exactly what to do. When Beidou's lips parted during the kiss, Kokomi tilted her head to the side, opening her mouth as the kiss deepened.

Beidou tried to hold herself back, she really did, but she almost became powerless to her whims as her

tongue slid its way past Kokomi's lips. However, Kokomi welcomed this passion, feeling a heat growing inside her as she felt Beidou's hands slowly wander down her back.

Everything felt so natural, even as Beidou's fingers moved down Kokomi's waist, gently brushing against the scales that lay at the top of her tail. The two felt like they could stay this way forever. But with a chill going up Beidou's spine, she knew she couldn't stay in the ocean much longer.

The sun had also long set, the sky becoming dark in its absence. Beidou slowly pulled herself away from Kokomi, resting her forehead against the mermaids.

"I'd hate to stop here but..." Beidou spoke, her voice trailing off.

"I know, It's getting dark and you need a good night's rest." Kokomi doted, sharing a warm smile. "Although I wish you had a better place to sleep than on this beach."

"Not much I can do about that, unfortunately," Beidou let out a chuckle. "But I'll be alright, not my first time sleeping outdoors like this."

"It's not just that... It- saddens me that you have to sleep alone, that I can't be there by your side."

Beidou couldn't help but feel her disappointment in this situation show on her face. She knew as well as Kokomi did that this simply wasn't a possibility. As much as they wanted to stay together through the night, it wasn't worth risking Kokomi's life for.

"Maybe I can sleep on the shore? As close to the water as I—" Beidou began to ramble, her words sounding strained as she tried to fight against the lump forming in her throat.

"Beidou..." Kokomi interrupted. "I can't let the tide sweep you away in your sleep. I won't go far, I will be back here as soon as the sun rises. You need to stay on dry land where it's most comfortable."

"You're right..." Beidou sighed. "Good night Kokomi, make sure you get some good sleep yourself."

Kokomi tilted her head up, placing a light kiss on Beidou's cheek. "I will."

The two then embraced into a deep hug, holding onto each other for a while before Kokomi slipped from Beidou's arms and swam deeper into the ocean.

Beidou stayed in the water for a moment, looking out over the horizon as the moon and stars began to illuminate the sky. She then walked out of the water, drying herself off the best she could before finding a

comfortable spot to lay and close her eyes.

~

As the mid-morning sun's rays cast down on the ocean, Kokomi raced through the water toward the shore. She was theoretically kicking herself for oversleeping, breaking her promise to Beidou that she would be back by sunrise. But after being unable to sleep for most of the night, there was no way Kokomi would have been able to wake up so early.

Every time Kokomi tried to close her eyes to sleep, all she could think about was Beidou. Her soft lips, the feeling of her hands grazing against Kokomi's back. The mermaid's mind raced with fantasies of pulling Beidou back into the water and never letting her go. It was a scene Kokomi replayed in her mind all night, fighting off her tiredness so she could hold on to the vision of Beidou's face in her mind.

Kokomi was already trying to think of some sort of excuse for her tardiness as she popped up from the ocean, the sight of Beidou still asleep on the beach making all her worries wash away.

Beidou lay still in the sand for only a moment before becoming restless, changing her position before turning over to her other side. Kokomi quietly made her way to the shore to be as close to the sleeping

captain as she could.

A few more minutes went by before Beidou sat up in the sand. She let out a loud yawn as she arched her back and stretched out her arms. Her sleepy eyes turned to a squint before opening to see Kokomi sitting in the ocean before her.

“Mornin’ Kokomi” Beidou spoke tiredly, another yawn escaping her lips.

“Good morning Beidou,” Kokomi smiled. “Were you able to sleep alright?”

“Agh... barely. Feels like I got sand stuck everywhere after laying here for so long, and my arm-”

“Your arm? Does it still hurt? Come here, let me see... please.”

Beidou let out a chuckle before standing up from the ground, brushing as much of the sand on her clothes off as she could. She then walked towards the shore and sat right in front of Kokomi.

As Kokomi reached out to feel Beidou’s sore arm, the captain quickly reached her other arm out and caught Kokomi in a hug.

“Ah!” Kokomi gasped in surprise, resting her hands on Beidous sides and looking at her.

“Heh- don’t worry, my arm’s okay. I’m just...” Beidou rested her head on Kokomi’s shoulder and closed her eyes. “...happy to see you.”

Kokomi let out a relieved sigh as she wrapped her arms around Beidou to hug her back.

“You could have just said that and come over anyway...” Kokomi giggled softly.

“I know, but you would have wanted to check on it anyway.” Beidou pulled away from the hug to look at Kokomi. “Plus you didn’t let me finish, I was gonna say after taking that swim last night my arm started feeling better. Doesn’t really feel sore anymore.”

“Mm, I guess I was too quick to worry. Anyways, that’s wonderful! Seems like you’re fully healed now.” Kokomi smiled as she reached out to hold both of Beidou’s hands, squeezing them gently.

“Yep... and it’s all thanks to you.”

Kokomi beamed as she grazed her thumbs over the calloused skin of Beidous hands. The gentle sensation only made Beidou crave the mermaid’s touch even more, pulling herself closer before a voice calling out from across the beach stopped her dead in her tracks.

“Captain Beidou? Captain, is that you?”

Beidou immediately turned her head toward the sound, leaning her head forward as she squinted to see who was calling for her. "Juza?"

Juza, the chief mate of the Alcor, started to make his way to Beidou with a couple of other members of the Crux following close behind.

"We've been looking all over this island for you!" Juza yelled excitedly. "I've been able to locate some of our crew..." His voice began to trail off.

Beidou turned back to look at Kokomi, who looked frozen in place in fear. It was clear that the sudden presence of a group of humans has made Kokomi uneasy, prompting Beidou to swiftly take action.

"Men!" Beidou called out, her body blocking Kokomi from the crew's sight. "Stay back, I'll be over in a bit... I- uh- need to change?"

Juza and the rest of the men were a bit puzzled, but they all knew better than to question their captain's orders. The crew stopped dead in their tracks and turned their backs to Beidou, giving her privacy.

Beidou let out the nervous breath she was holding back before turning her body back around. Kokomi's look of fear was now replaced by a look of sadness that almost tore Beidou's heart in two. The mermaid

glanced down at the ocean as she tried to hold back the tears forming in her eyes.

"So... I guess this is goodbye," Kokomi's words trailed off into a whisper.

"Kokomi..." Beidou spoke before placing a hand on Kokomi's cheek, tilting her head upwards.

Kokomi could feel her heart skip a beat as she stared into Beidou's eyes. The same eyes that reminded her of the sunset, the very sunset that played as a backdrop to their first kiss. The thought of that kiss... possibly being their last, was enough to cause the tears that Kokomi fought so hard to hold back to begin streaming down her face. Beidou could almost feel her eyes becoming heavy with emotion as she swiped her thumb gently across Kokomi's face to wipe away her tears.

"...This- isn't goodbye forever." Beidou placed both of her hands on Kokomi's cheeks. "Whether it's in this life or the next, we will see each other again."

"You promise?" Kokomi asked as her eyes grew wide.

"I promise," Beidou responded before leaning in and gently pressing her lips against Kokomi's

Kokomi closed her eyes as she savored the taste of

Beidou's lips, feeling almost frozen as the captain took the reins and deepened the kiss. So bad did Beidou want to get lost in this moment, she sensed the same in Kokomi, but they both knew they couldn't.

The two reluctantly pulled away from each other, with Beidou's hands slowly grazing Kokomi's cheeks before fully pulling away from her face.

Beidou quickly glanced over her shoulder to see Juza and the other men still standing across the beach with their backs turned. Kokomi could sense hesitation in Beidou as her eyes kept shifting from her crew to Kokomi and back.

"Go on, my dear," Kokomi spoke softly. "You can't keep your crew waiting any longer."

"Right," Beidou nodded. "I... I'll let you go first and make sure they don't see you. But, thank you again, for everything."

Kokomi blushed as she gave a reassuring nod to Beidou before diving underneath the water, swimming deeper into the water.

Beidou then got herself up off the ground, standing still for a moment and staring out over the horizon. After losing sight of Kokomi in the water, she let out a deep breath.

"Until we meet again, Kokomi..." Beidou whispered out to the sea. "I- love you."

The captain then turned towards where her crew was standing, calling out for them before quickly walking across the beach to join them. Once Juza and the remaining members of the Crux led Beidou off the beach and further inland, Kokomi peeked her head up from the water.

"I love you too, Beidou..." Kokomi spoke out to herself as a warm smile spread across her face.

Kokomi hesitated diving back underwater, thinking about how she no longer had anything to look forward to when coming back up to land. Deep in her heart, she knew that the ocean would call back out to Beidou faster than the land would call out to Kokomi. The sea was as much of Beidou's home as it was Kokomi's, and it was where the two would hopefully meet once again.

With reassurance sending a surge of energy throughout the mermaid's body, she withdrew herself back below the water's surface and swam back into its depths.



Drunken Dreams of Storm-Wrought Beginnings

by Cadriona | ship: Beidou/Ningguang

content tags: injury, partial nudity

The Emerald Maple Inn was a small, decrypt combination of a teahouse and inn in the middle of nowhere, and it was in this middle of nowhere that the Crux fleet had decided to bed down for the night. With how quickly the sun seemed to set over the plains, Beidou doubted that even she would be able to make it to the harbour before sundown brought howling winds and rivers of rain, much less her crewmates who would not have the *qi* to sustain themselves through such a long flight.

The job had taken them far from the ocean, from the rest of her crew aboard the Alcor, but it had decent pay and one couldn't be picky when most high-paying jobs were taken to the sects instead of mercenary crews like those that made up Beidou's family of misfits. It had been a simple retrieval mission— a nobleman and his children had gone sightseeing with their guards before going missing, and the mistress of the house had been worried enough to send out missives to any groups that might be up to the task.

Somehow, Mora Grubber had gotten wind of the job and brought it back to Beidou, resulting in a week of searching by sword and by foot and significant applications of violence.

There was a lot more violence than anticipated, but they returned, triumphant, with the three frightened souls barely harmed and without their guards.

It had been an inside job, where one of the guards had collaborated with the bandits to collect the ransom on the noble family. The few loyal retainers had become collateral early in the conflict, dead before Beidou even arrived. But the family remained unharmed, and they stayed unharmed through the skirmish wherein the traitors were summarily removed from the living plane. Soon, the rogue cultivator had a sniffling noblemen riding behind her on her sword and their course pointing back towards civilization.

Yet, despite the hefty sum they earned when they finally reunited the tearful family, her crew was still stuck in the middle of Guili Plains when night fell instead of back to the shoreline where the rest of the fleet had temporarily docked. And to make matters worse, the weather was ghastly— even the ambient *qi* was in turmoil as if some fool had decided to unseal a calamity.

The number of times that has happened in Beidou's

lifetime could be counted on one hand, but when the lands normally remain unravaged for centuries at a time, one has to wonder. The last time had also resulted in a trespasser, now a tenant in her head when her crew went to hunt down the dreaded sea monster, so perhaps her wariness was warranted.

At least the teahouse served decent booze.

“*Xiao er, another!*” Beidou called, waving the empty jar in the air. There was a pleasant buzz in her head, warming her bones and easing the strains and stresses of the day from tired muscles. Should the need arise however, she could clear out the alcohol in her system quite efficiently.

A fun little cultivation benefit that had annoyed Yinxing to no end once she finally figured it out, as she could no longer scold Beidou on her alcoholic tendencies.

The *xiao er*, a young lad dressed in dull blues and browns, hurried over with a grin, taking the jar off her hands with a cheerful “right away!” before setting off for the kitchen, where the sounds of pots and pans managed to cover the din from outside. The wind roared outside tightly shut windows, but for all that the inn was rather... rickety in appearance, its walls didn’t groan and the doors didn’t rattle.

Perhaps it was the weather, but the inn was also

rather deserted. Beidou didn’t mind, and neither did Juza, as he had cheerfully called for five rooms for the lot of them instead of the usual two or three at a discount price. Mora Grubber would normally say something along the lines of how that was not a profitable business practice, but she had been ecstatic over the bonus given by their client and was therefore willing to splurge a bit.

She was also the only one to head to the rooms as soon as they received the keys, with a warning to the rest of the crew not to disturb her unless the sky was fracturing.

It was while waiting for the *xiao er*’s return that the door to the inn swung open, the wood slamming into the wall with a resounding *crack*.

A young man stumbled across the raised threshold, garbed in flowing, light blue robes and hair the color of the dark sea, done in one of those ostentatious manners worn by the larger sects. His eyes were golden and frightened, and the sword slung across his back marked him as an apprentice cultivator. Or perhaps that was the jade pendant hanging from his belt, a small, intricate piece that identified junior cultivators from Liyue. Last she heard, those pendants could go for a significant amount in the right circles. Beidou’s belt hung empty of identifying trinkets, nothing but pouches and knives and flasks and nothing declaring her allegiance. Her hairpin and

eyepatch in this day and age were more than enough.

Despite his frenzied appearance, within two steps the young man had composed himself enough to call for the inn's boss, and if not for the two figures stumbling in after him and his disheveled hair, Beidou might have thought he was a different person compared to the panicked teen from bare moments earlier.

Oho, this ought to be interesting.

Beidou ignored the echoing voice in her head, but the old, disembodied sea dragon had taken notice of potential commotion and had been roused from his sleep. Pity, she will miss the silence.

"Excuse me," he said, "would your *zhang men* be in?"

The *xiao er*, who did not return with the jar of *baijiu* that Beidou had been looking forward to despite his long absence in the despondent inn, gaped for a moment before harrying back into the kitchen to lead out the chef. Perhaps the *zhang men* was out, or perhaps the chef was her husband, but none of that was Beidou's business.

While the teen presumably negotiated with the boss for rooms or something, Beidou turned her eye to the two that followed behind him.

"Hey cap," Furong muttered, leaning in, "isn't that the exorcist prodigy from Liyue?"

And it was. The light blue hair and slitted pupils were both rare traits, and even moreso when combined onto a single young man who had a blade almost as tall as he was strapped to his back. Despite the distance separating the two, Beidou could feel the ice-tinged *qi* that practically wafted off the young man. Yet even with a cultivator of significant renown now amongst their midst, it was the woman who drew Beidou's attention.

She was tall, maybe even taller than Beidou's own significant height. Her hair was white like dusted snow, tips burnished as if dipped in gold. A pair of red eyes that flitted across the room, cataloging threats, allies, and potential resources alike before briefly meeting Beidou's, then focusing on the teen who was still arguing with the boss.

That one has pretty eyes, not as pretty as mine though.

What the fuck are you yammering on about?

The woman was also limping, leaning heavily on her right leg and with an arm slung across the shoulders of the young exorcist. There was an alarming amount

of blood staining the side of her gold and white robes, and from the scent that blew in with the wind, recent too.

She shuddered as if fighting down a cough, but raised her sleeve to cover her mouth when it didn't succeed. It sounded wet, and her sleeve came away red. There was a muted horror rising in Beidou's chest, but the copious amounts of alcohol she had downed earlier curbed the rougher edges of it.

Outside, just beyond the surprisingly clear-cut boundaries of the inn and the elements, winds howled, and what could have been lei gong throwing a tantrum between strikes of lightning. Raised voices drew her attention back to where the young cultivator was arguing with the inn's chef.

"We just want two rooms with an acceptable hygiene standard," the young cultivator said, a visible crease growing between his brows, "if necessary, we can even pay additional for it."

"Ah, but as I've said, young master, we don't have two rooms free. We don't even have one! All of them have been spoken for and already paid, and it would be poor business if I kicked someone out after they already paid, would it not?"

"Then I will pay them for the rooms, even double the

price! Just so long as we get privacy and—"

"Young master, that's really not how we—"

Beidou had seen enough, and she was in a good enough mood to be charitable. Or maybe she was still drunk, and there was that shred of guilt because the Crux had been the one to book all five of the rooms, one for each crewmate that came on this job. They were used to each other enough to share a room on the Alcor, but Beidou normally had her captain's cabin nowadays. Hopefully Mora Grubber wouldn't threaten to skin her alive if she decided to part with two of the rooms.

There were many possibilities of why she decided to speak up, but none of them felt truly right. Regardless, Beidou traded in favors just as much as she traded in mora, and none of her crew would fault her for aiding the obviously Liyue sect-associated cultivators. Some of her crew had ties to the large sect, after all, and she would hate to bring tidings of accidental alienation.

"Hey, you don't need to pay us double, but we can lend ya two of our rooms," she called out, instantly drawing the attention of the young cultivator.

Tension eased out of the young man's frame, and he flashed Beidou a smile. Very white teeth, and unlike the woman with him, his weren't stained by blood. "Your kindness is greatly appreciated, milady—"

Mother of fuck someone just called you a milady.

And so Haishan decided to speak, again, and it was nothing constructive.

Kindly shut your trap.

You're still drunk, you utter buffoon of a human.

Oh, right.

It was never a pleasant experience, flushing alcohol out of one's system, but it was one that Beidou was unfortunately quite familiar with. A few more cycles of *qi* through her meridians to clear out the last dregs of inebriation, and the only alcohol that was on her was in the form of sweet-scented sweat. Perhaps she will go and stand in the rain for a bit afterwards, to further clear her mind and clean the sweat off her skin.

But it was with dawning sobriety that the muted horror unveiled itself, growing in her chest with the hunger of a thorned, many clawed thing. What was that woman doing, still standing over in the wind, outside the threshold, like a too thin, too broken willow?

Consumed by churning thoughts, Beidou nearly missed the young man's next words. “— may have your

name perhaps? This favor will not remain unfulfilled as long as I, Xingqiu of the Guhua clan, draws breath.”

Juza snorted into his drink, splattering the table with sweet-scented plum wine. “You’re *who*?”

“Xingqiu, that’s enough,” the white-haired woman sighed, her words nearly stolen by a sudden shriek of wind. There were still specks of blood on her lips, and even if Beidou and her crew tend to avoid the territories of larger sects when they could, the Crux doesn’t leave people for dead when any other choice is available. Beidou twisted in her seat to face the door and the people wavering there better, only to catch a glimpse of Yinxing furiously signaling with her eyebrows.

Figures, their physician probably didn’t want to leave whatever was troubling the woman to fester for longer than necessary.

“As this one’s disciple has said, your generosity is greatly appreciated, and your aid will be repaid in *mora* when we return to our sect.” Finally, the two of them stepped over the threshold. With a motion of his hand that the exorcist prodigy sent a talisman to either door, and another flick sent the doors closing behind them, soundless.

Excessive, but it got the point across.

“Lady,” Beidou said, pushing down whatever expression that could’ve alarmed the woman, “with your state, how far can you get?”

“It is but some injuries to the flesh, nothing time wouldn’t recover.”

If time was such an all-encompassing balm then I would not be relegated to such a state.

Huh, and here I was, so sure possession and parasitic tendencies belonged to their own categories.

“Then may I volunteer the services of our healer?” Yinxing kicked Beidou under the table, but it barely registered. “She is quite adept at mending all manners of ailments, be they flesh wounds or spiritual, and I can swear on my honor as the captain of the Crux fleet that no harm will befall you under our care.”

The woman’s brows knitted together, and the young man—Xingqiu, straightened, his eyes guarded.

“I—”

“Xingqiu,” the young man who had yet to speak, the one that held ice in his *qi* and probably snow in his bones, finally spoke. “I think we should let Mas—,

ahem, the Lady decide.” He grimaced, and the little display of emotion seemed to snap Xingqiu out from whatever he had wanted to say.

“Very well. Then, while the Lady decides, I will go and ascertain the rooms.” Beidou flicked her lone eye towards the boy, and with a knowing eye-roll, Juza rummaged through his pockets for the keychain that the innkeeper had given them earlier that evening. He removed two and stood up, catching the eye of the young man, and with obvious, telegraphed movements, tossed the keys.

They glinted in their trajectory, and Xingqiu caught them with a jingle and a raised brow. “My thanks,” he said, but he hesitated when he was about to turn for the staircase to the second floor.

“Don’t dally, Xingqiu, I would be a poor excuse for a cultivator if I couldn’t even last the night, wouldn’t I?”

“We’ll retire as well,” Juza said, standing, and tugging Furong up with him.

And then they left, and somehow Beidou’s table was suddenly only occupied by herself and Yinxing, who pulled out the neighboring stool with a grating screech and motioned to the worn seat.

For a long moment, nobody spoke— even though

Yinxing's fingers twitched every time the lady took a rattling breath.

Then, "it is uncommon for a sea-farer such as yourself to find themselves so far inland," the woman mused, "much less the captain of the Crux Fleet. Tell me, captain, for what reason is the Uncrowned Lord of Dragons getting drunk at an inn like this?"

"I could ask the same of you, lady." It had taken a bit, but now that her mind was clear of the alcohol's addling effects, Beidou mentally kicked herself for not realizing sooner. "For what reason would one of the mighty sect elders of the Liyue Qixing end up bleeding all over the floors of this little inn, in the middle of fucking nowhere?"

Wow, that was a mouthful.

Nobody asked for your opinion.

"Are you two going to keep doing— whatever this is, or are you going to let me do my job?"

"Why, is the physician not even going to let me introduce myself?"

Yinxing huffed, but it was Beidou that reached into her sleeve, groped around in the space that was bigger by

virtue of Mora Grubber's side hobby of crafting anything that could save the crew mora, and pulled out a silencing tag to adhere on the center of the table. A pulse of carefully applied *qi*, pulled from tired meridians and a hint of crackling thunder, and the tag flashed.

The effect was immediate, the sounds of the kitchen muted and the storm suddenly absent.

"You have a one-way silencing talisman?" the young exorcist asked, cat-slit eyes following the curves and swoops of the careful calligraphy strokes.

Before Beidou could answer, because what self-respecting mercenary leader wouldn't have a silencing tag for clientele privacy purposes, the lady beat her to it.

"It would appear to be so," she murmured, hand twitching as if to reach out if not for the faint flicker of pain that flashed across her features. "The lines could be steadier, and the materials could be of a higher quality to maximize their potential, but the theory is intact. Talismans of this quality, despite its cruder details, would still fetch a high price in cultivator circles." She leaned back, and Beidou's eye traced the sweep of white hair, the curve of a pale throat, and forced herself to look away, to follow the slow taps of a

nail tipped in a golden claw. She swallowed.

A white-haired woman who wore golden claws, and a cultivator that belonged to the Liyue Qixing on top of that.

There were lines connecting in Beidou's mind, and she wasn't sure if she liked them.

I can hear your brain frying from in here. Careful, or you might actually end up thinking.

One day I will figure out how to shut you up. Permanently.

"Tell me, Chongyun, what would you do to make this a higher quality talisman, other than the points I have already mentioned?"

Yinxing was probably going to burst a vessel if the woman proceeds to ignore her again, but it was a well-acknowledged fact that one doesn't just try to force diagnosing or healing on unknown cultivators—unless one was in need of a death wish.

"Lady Ni— err, Master, maybe you should let the healer take a look at you first?"

"Nonsense. I am perfectly capable of—"

To punctuate her state of being perfectly fine, she coughed again, hand not quite rising in time to prevent specks of blood from splattering over the table. Miraculously they all seemed to miss the talismen, but from what Beidou has witnessed thus far, that could very well mean that the lady chose to use whatever *qi* that wasn't trying to desperately repair her body to divert the drops.

The priorities of sect-dwellers are... sometimes concerning.

"Master, please."

The lady sighed. "Very well." Saying thus, she gingerly placed her right arm on the table, and before she could even think to do so herself, Yinxing tried to reach over to roll up the woman's sleeve, only to pause. The woman coughed, wiping away the dribble of blood down her chin. "This is but a flesh wound— if my injuries hinder your education on this trip, what master would I be?"

"One that's alive, I would say," Beidou said.

The glare that she received was withering, but her red eyes were also searching, looking for something that Beidou couldn't give her.

But finally, the woman relented with a sigh, rolled up

her sleeve, and bared her wrist to the Alcor's one and only competent physician. Judging by the wide eyes on the pale-haired disciple, Beidou wasn't the only one surprised. Perhaps this was an opportunity to push a bit more? It would distract her from the bare arm in front of her, at least.

She swallowed, took a moment to focus on the cycle of *qi* through her meridians to ease whatever bruises still existed from their earlier encounter with the turncoat bandit. Then Beidou plastered a shit-eating grin back on her face.

"So, now that we're somewhat acquainted, lemme introduce myself for the benefit of your cute little disciple here since I'm at the disadvantage of you knowing me, but your disciple is still out of the loop."

There was a muttered "not cute" from the kid's corner of the table, but Beidou ignored it with all the grace of someone accustomed to ignoring the whining of Little Yue when he wants to join in a job.

"Beidou here, of the Crux fleet. Rogue cultivator and mercenary at your service, and these few here with me are my crew. Yinxing you've already been introduced to, she's the healer out of the bunch of us, and the main reason why most of us are still alive, and Juza here is my first mate. There are two others, but they aren't here at the moment.."

"It is... a pleasure to meet you, Captain Beidou." The woman said slowly, "your crew as well. This here is Chongyun, and the disciple that left earlier is Xingqiu. The two are prized pupils of the Liyue sect, and budding masters in their respective fields." She gestured towards the finally named Chongyun with the hand that wasn't held down by an increasingly concerned Yinxing, the only tell betraying her pain a marginal tightening around crimson eyes.

Unbidden, I'm willing to bet three days of silence that the human is going to kneel over in the next hour.

Beidou paused at the sudden offer. It was a tantalizing one, as the sea dragon was more of a heart demon than any that she's heard of. Three days of blessed silence would do wonders. She assessed the lady again, and—

Deal.

If she loses, it would mean Beidou misjudged the lady, and Beidou doesn't tend to misjudge people.

"And you?" Beidou prompted, when the woman paused.

"Why, so impatient are we? I am Ningguang, Tianquan of the Qixing, elder of the Liyue sect."

And she stopped. Beidou waited, because while she did not believe that this Ningguang of the Liyue sect would be one of those who liked to drone on and on about her accomplishments, none came.

What came, was Yinxing pushing a considerable sigh out of her nose as she lifted her hand from Ningguang's wrist, and proclaimed "I have no idea how you are still alive right now."

Which earned the white-haired woman in question a very sharp look from her disciple, who seemed about to say something before getting interrupted by Yinxing ticking symptoms off her fingers.

"You barely have enough *qi* left for a civilian much less a cultivator, your lung has likely been punctured and appears to be held together by the last pathetic dregs of *qi* you still have, your left femur is broken in three places, the meridians in your left arm have practically been obliterated and will likely become useless if immediate attention is not applied, and your core..." Yinxing paused, heedless of how pale that her patient and listeners have gotten, and tapped a carefully maintained nail against the table. "You... did you destroy your bonded spiritual tool?"

"It was necessary."

Beidou grimaced. There were tales of cultivators who

lost something in themselves when they lost their spiritual tool, whether it be a weapon, an amulet, or some flight-capable instrument. If Ningguang deemed the destruction of her *bonded* spiritual tool necessary, if a *Liyue Qixing* deemed it necessary, then the mercenary shuddered to consider what would have prompted the decision.

Outside, thunder shrieked.

Apparently it was a day of revelations, because there was a sharp intake of breath from behind Beidou, one that nearly caused her to whip around with a blade in hand, but Xingqiu was hoarse when he asked, "the Jade Chamber was a spiritual tool?"

Ningguang gave him a smile, one that to Beidou's lone eye appeared just a touch wane, and just a bit tired. "Its size is misleading, is it not?"

"Are we ignoring the fact that the lady is like, nearly dead?" Juza whispered to Yinxing, which was not unnoticed by anyone present.

"If you all would stop fucking interrupting, I was getting to it."

Your physician is out for blood! Haishan's voice echoed inside her mind with the malicious glee of someone thinking they're about to win a cruel bet against fate.

“Ah yes, please enlighten me with how I should avoid my impending demise.” For someone who looked simultaneously gorgeous but also with a foot in the grave, Ningguang was entirely too amused.

“Do you have any *qi* pills?”

“We... ran out. This disciple is sorry for not bringing more supplies on a—”

“The situation had grown out of control, do not burden yourself with should-haves and plan better for the future.”

“This disciple understands.”

Yinxing cleared her throat. “Then I will be assuming that you are similarly out of other medicinal pills considering you’re still bleeding over the floor?”

“That would be accurate.”

“Well, unfortunately, owing to *likewise* unfortunate circumstances, our group is out of *qi* pills as well. However, I do have a few home-made blood-replenishing pills and have experience in patching up torn tissues and meridians courtesy of first-hand experience if you’re willing to accept.”

Beside the physician, Beidou mouthed *accept* at the

maybe-dying woman, who finally nodded, prompting Yinxing to whip out a small sack of multi-colored pills and pluck out three large red ones. She slid them across the table, and pushed her own cooling cup of tea towards the Tianquan. It was fortunate, then, that unlike the rest of Beidou’s crew Yinxing had chosen to abstain from alcohol that evening. The physician watched Ninguan swallow each of the pills with a critical eye, it wouldn’t do for the woman to kneel over from choking after all.

Satisfied that she was regaining some measure of color, Yinxing nodded to herself. “Great, so those problems are solved. Of course, your *qi* is still stupendously low, so you’re going to need an infusion since nobody has any fucking *qi* pills.”

Xingqiu grimaced. “I would gladly volunteer, but I think if I tried to give any at this point I’d get sent into a *qi* deviation.”

“I too would volunteer, but my masters have said that due to the excessive yang component in my *qi*, it would result in unfathomable issues for the recipient.”

Perhaps Beidou didn’t flush all of the alcohol out of the system, perhaps she was feeling generous and wanted to help just a bit more, or perhaps the captain of the Crux fleet wasn’t willing to let the woman die for unknown to all but her own drumming heart.

Regardless of whatever demon other than the one in her head possessed her, Beidou said, “I still have some *qi* to spare, but it might be a bit hard to assimilate due to its volatility.”

Haishan’s integration into her mind, her meridians, and her life had not been a smooth one, even if the phantom of a sea dragon granted her a larger pool of *qi* to draw from and a faster recovery rate. If the cost was occasionally spitting sparks and the sensation of lightning streaking through her veins, she will deal. If her covered eye was no longer her own, seeing too much in too many ways, she will deal.

It was much better than the alternative of her crew dying, back then.

“Captain, you realize that I said her meridians were *mangled*, right? And you do realize that the electro bouncing around in your *qi* isn’t gonna do the woman any favors, *right?*” Yinxing sighed. “But—I can’t, since I’ll need my *qi* for the healing process, and nobody else here has the finesse so...”

Ningguang shrugged, casually graceful despite the growing splotches of ugly color splattered beneath her skin. “I accept the captain’s offer, regardless. I have dealt with my fair share of volatile *qi* in the past, this will not be some unfathomable hurdle.”

“Fantastic! Then, we’ll probably move to a room, I’ll get started, and the captain will come in once I think you can handle the *qi* transfer. Your disciples are welcome as long as they stay quiet and don’t get in the way, or they can wait outside like everyone else.”

“They will wait outside.”

~

It was a surprisingly painless affair, getting the Tianquan up the stairs into a room. She had accepted Beidou’s offer to fly her up on her claymore despite the short distance, which had both her disciples whispering at each other. But as soon as Yinxing checked the room over, the physician shut the door in her captain’s face.

Silence fell, after that, Beidou shooing the rest of her crew to rest for the night while she and the two disciples stood vigil outside the door.

~

Eons passed in the space between one breath and the next, and the soft sound of the door opening next to her drew Beidou out of her meditation. She hesitated when the hand beckoned her into the room, hastily pulling out a piece of paper and scrawling down a quick note that she tucked under the broadsword of

one of the lightly snoozing disciples. They were young and growing and had just experienced what sounded like quite an event, they've more than earned their rest.

The room was dimly lit, a few candlesticks and a lonely brazier the only oasis of light.

Your human eye is pitiful. Allow me instead.

Not happening.

A fissure of pain lanced through her covered eye as if proclaiming the sea dragon's displeasure, but she ignored him with the will that has ignored all of his honeyed words, before he decided that temptation was a futile tactic. It wasn't as if she was blind in the darkness, her eye adapts quite efficiently in the dark, and a cultivator's eyesight was nothing to scoff at. She wasn't one of those ridiculous immortals that could spy the webbing on a fly's wing from a mile away, but for now, her eye was more than enough.

Following Yinxing, she navigated the clutter that covered the ground of the room, from a stray basin, numerous rags and bandages, to what appeared to be half a splint. There was another silencing talisman tacked to the center table, of a significantly better quality than what the physician had used earlier that

day. Perhaps she could borrow it afterwards, if only to show Mora Grubber.

But what drew her eye and didn't let go, however, was the white haired woman. Ningguang was sitting on the bed, the covers beneath her stained the same shade of dark red as the bandages wound around her chest and arm. Her hair, previously done up in a lavish bun, had been instead pulled into a simple long ponytail thrown over her shoulder, leaving her back exposed. Her breathing was soft and unlabored; stronger than when she first stumbled across the inn's threshold but missing the strength of a cultivator practiced in meditation and *qi* control.

And she *was* meditating, back straight, shoulders relaxed, and brilliant red eyes closed to the world.

Beidou almost felt as if she was intruding, but a stutter in the woman's breath and a near imperceptible grimace that passed over her face had the pirate striding over to the bed, kicking her boots off, and taking a seat behind the woman. She crossed her legs, made herself comfortable, and gently settled her breath and heartbeat, allowing the *qi* to slowly, consciously, circle through her meridians.

"Careful now, captain, just a bit at a time."

Beidou hummed, and said to the woman in front of her: “Ningguang was it? I’m going to start now.”

Raising her hands before her, Beidou hesitated for the barest of moments before settling her palms against Ningguang’s bare back, between two prominent shoulder blades that she had to consciously stop herself from tracing. Ningguang’s skin was soft, and almost cool to the touch, but Beidou drew her focus inwards, away from the sensation under her hand, and teased a break in her flow of *qi*.

She pushed the broken strand towards her palms, then towards the woman in front of her, and focused on drawing out as much of the Electro as possible so that the *qi* would be passed through at a steady rate.

She anticipated her *qi*, the volatile, foreign aspects of it striving for freedom, but what she was wholly unprepared for was Ningguang’s near-empty meridians drawing it in. Every morsel of *qi* that Beidou pushed through their connection, tenuous it may be, was readily tamed by the woman before her in a manner that Beidou had never believed possible.

Almost like lightning being drawn down to earth, she thought, before wiping the thought from her mind for later perusal.

It has been many years since I have sensed someone

with this type of compatibility. Perhaps—

She shut the sea dragon out of her mind before he could continue, the echoing voice silenced.

With every cycle of *qi* where she separated some from her own meridians to feed into that of the white haired woman, she felt a bit stronger, a bit more present.

Without a stick of incense, Beidou was unable to tell how much time had passed before Yinxing finally broke her silence and said, “that’s enough for now, let Lady Ningguang rest and assimilate your *qi* first. Then we can think about giving more, if necessary.”

There was a measured exhale, and Ningguang turned to face the physician. “I do not believe there will be a need. What the good captain has given is more than sufficient for me to rebuild my own reserves, and your own efforts to mend the meridians in my arm has been well received by the presence of cycling *qi*. Come morning, I should be travel capable.”

A weighty pause, where red eyes that gleamed in the darkness seemed to pass over the physician and focus on Beidou. “However, seeing as you and your crew will likely have to follow my disciples and I back to Liyue to receive your compensation—”

“Woman, I don’t—”

“You *will* be compensated. Neither I nor my disciples are ones to go back on our words. Additionally, seeing as we will be traveling together however briefly, I would like to draw up a contract.”

“A contract? Whatever for?”

“Why, escorting us safely back to Liyue, of course. Do not turn me down now, captain, I am sure it will be worth your time.”

Beidou didn’t.

~

The disciples roused themselves rather quickly when Beidou made her way out of the room, and upon obtaining permission, rushed inside to check on their master. Yinxing had changed the bandages again and applied more salve when Ningguang was discussing the contract with Beidou despite the pirate’s insistence on how an informal statement being enough already, but somehow they devolved into talking about other topics after Yinxing finished and left them to their own devices.

When morning came, it brought the scent of

dissipating fog and new life, the storm from the previous night naught but a memory.

Beidou and her crew had an easy breakfast to prepare for the traveling ahead, the cheap fare a point of curiosity for Xingqiu and a relief for Chongyun. For a woman from the most prominent sect on this side of Teyvat, Beidou was surprised by how easily she accepted the plain bowl of congee and meat bun.

This food is fucking boring. When I was alive, I dined on the finest of—

Yeah yeah, when you were alive and worshiped. Buddy, you’re dead. You also lost the fucking bet, so kindly shut up.

Hmph. Youngsters these days, no respect for their elders.

It didn’t take long for everyone to prepare to leave after eating, and Beidou sent Juza and Furong back to the rest of the crew to inform them of the cause of the delay. She kept Mora Grubber and Yinxing with her however, Yinxing because the physician insisted on periodically checking up on Ningguang, and Mora Grubber because she had some wares on hand from a previous expedition that could fetch a notable price among cultivation sects.

Setting off, however, proved to be the harder part.

The same bonded spiritual tool that Yinxing had deduced yesterday had also been Ningguang's flight tool, and while Chongyun had managed to ferry the Qixing on his broadsword to the inn from wherever the sealing had occurred, the young man admitted that it would be difficult for him to carry another person on his broadsword over such a long distance.

Xingqiu, who had the reserves, did not have a two-person sword, the thin blade a piece of balanced craftsmanship solely tailored to the young man.

So somehow, it fell to Beidou to escort the Tianquan on her broadsword, her control honed from years of hauling crewmates that fell overboard, and reserves refilled after rest and food. But even on the large two-hander, it was impossible for two people to keep their footing without touching, and so for the remainder of the trip Beidou had an arm full of Tianquan and a face full of white hair.

She smelled like glaze lilies and ink, with the faintest undertones of blood.

It was also hard to converse with the wind ripping words from their mouths before they could voice them, but Beidou's proximity meant that she could talk nearly directly to Ningguang's ear, and whatever

words the other woman had for her was caught as snatches of sound and vibrations through her chest.

For the entire duration of the trip, Beidou was certain that her nape was a flaming red. At least she wasn't alone though, seeing as Ningguang's ear tips were red in a manner very much not due to wind chill.

The only stop they made was at noon, both so the disciples and Beidou's crew could rest, and so that Yinxing could give Ningguang's injuries a check. They were healing marvelously, the physician had said, but recovering from the near complete *qi* exhaustion meant that her meridians were refilling slower than normal, even with the boost, and exerting herself may result in a *qi* deviation.

Sundown brought with it a change in landscape, from flat plains interspaced with hills and lush forests to a view of the ocean and it's nestled town. The Liyue sect prospered with trade and resources from the ocean, and its cultivators were known across Teyvat for their capabilities in all manners of ...anything, really.

With the gates in view, Beidou tried to shuffle around on her sword, so that their position wasn't compromising for the Tianquan and her reputation, but a hand laid across her arm stayed her movements.

The expressions on the gate guards could be summed

up as incredulous, even as they waved Ningguang and Beidou through but crossed their weapons against Juza and Yinxing.

“Master Ningguang, Lady Beidou, we will settle the matters here, please go on without us.”

And then it was just the two of them. While it wasn’t the most appropriate to fly at such low altitudes in cities, it was prudent for Ningguang to return to Yujing Terrace as soon as reasonably possible to report back on the outcomes of the mission.

There were gawking onlookers, probably wondering why the Tianquan was sharing a foreign broadsword with a foreign woman when her Jade Chamber was her pride and joy. Beidou has never wished to live in the limelight, and the stares sent pricked down her skin.

“There,” Ningguang pointed, a long golden claw glinting in the dying sun. The “there” was a building longer than even the Alcor, and taller than its main mast. When they arrived at the foot of it, Ningguang gently patted Beidou’s hand for her to let go, and stepped down from the broadsword. Beidou hopped off as well, and a touch of *qi* and intent had the weapon returning to the sheath slung across her back.

Show-off.

“So... I’ll just wait out here then?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Ningguang said, stepping into Beidou’s space and tilting the captain’s chin up with a claw. Her eyes were as red as the blood that she was spilling the night before, and the curl of her smile was that of a tiger that had finally returned to her mountain. Beidou swallowed, her throat suddenly dry, and could only nod when the woman said, “follow me in, and after I update my colleagues on the state of Osial’s seal, I will give you your compensation. And if it is satisfactory,” the faint curl of a smile was now a smirk, “then perhaps we can draw up something more long-term. Connections are invaluable in our world, as you well know, and we can both serve to benefit from this mutual agreement.”

Needless to say, Beidou followed her in.

The compensation was more than adequate, and when the captain walked out to find her crewmates holed up in a restaurant with the two disciples a few hours later, there was a contract inked in blood in her pouch and enough mora for the crew to feast for months.

She sat down heavily at the table, startling the four out of their conversation. Beidou grinned, lone eye crinkling shut. “So,” she said, “since apparently we’ll be around a lot more, I was thinking we could make a bit of a base here, what do you say?”



Motivations

by cat_unicreating | ship: Sucrose/Noelle
content tags: N/A

Sucrose is aware of Noelle's motivations, she has to be, with how often she relies on her astute observations.

She does note that it's not exactly a secret to anyone, but as the rose-scented girl begins to carry *out* all the boxes Sucrose worked so hard to carry *in* the lab, she is painfully aware of the reason why she is trying to help.

Noelle, Noelle, Noelle.

Always the maid, never the knight.

The alchemist would be lying if she said she didn't feel sorry for her. Sucrose cannot understand what exactly it is that the Acting Grand Master is waiting for. As per her analysis, the more Jean delays the matter, the more Noelle sacrifices herself in hopes that one of her many deeds will get the one and only reward she desires.

She is a gentle soul, who does not deserve this treatment.

Even if a pinch of frustration sprinkles in her chest when she sees how the boxes are perfectly lined outside, Sucrose doesn't dare to show it one bit, not with how hard the maid is working for her benefit. Instead, she patiently waits for Noelle to put down the last box and walks over to her, gently touching her shoulder.

"Thank you very much for your help, Noelle."

She says those words sincerely, with a hand on her heart and a shy smile. As it is, Sucrose can't help but notice the way Noelle's pale cheeks flush a soft crimson. The alchemist finds it a bit strange, if not interesting - with how many people appreciate the maid knight's work, she thought she would be used to it by now.

Then again, Sucrose is not really one to judge with how hopeless she is at socializing herself.

Rather than pointing out her obvious flustered state, Sucrose looks back at the boxes, the gears turning in her brain for a possible solution to Noelle's taste for overworking.

She thinks she has found something good enough to say when she murmurs her thoughts and the maid naturally gets closer to her. Olive eyes stare into hers for a few seconds before directing her gaze to the ground, cheeks as red as the roses in her hair, stepping back from her personal space.

The alchemist's heart leaps once she notices just how close they actually were. Despite everything, she awkwardly starts again, loud enough this time.

"Uhm, as I was saying. I'm very grateful for your help, but you don't need to come help everyday."

"Does my help bother you?"

Noelle's genuine, half-hurt question catches her by surprise, and Sucrose is just quick enough to deny it with her hands.

"No! Not at all. I just... I don't wish to put this extra stress upon you."

"If that's the case, don't worry about it, Miss Sucrose" Noelle suddenly takes her hands, a kind smile on her face "I sincerely wish to help you."

"Well, uhm..."

"I insist" Noelle stares at her and Sucrose finds herself

nodding, which immediately allows a relieved smile to show on the maid's lips "Please leave absolutely everything to me."

With her last words sounding like a promise, something inside Sucrose simply *knows*. Although the aspiring knight is the type to always help, she's not the type to push it or insist. There's something else behind her offer, an ulterior motive she can't quite put her finger on.

With the morning sun climbing high in the sky, the alchemist looks down at their intertwined hands and makes a resolution. As she always does when she doesn't understand something, she decides that this matter will become her new subject to study.

~

Sucrose, like any good scientist, prepares the project's variables in advance.

The materials Albedo has requested for the experiment are too heavy for her to lift from Favonius headquarters to the alchemy shop. Having Noelle carrying them instead means her efforts to help will not be in vain, and she's sure that the maid will focus so much on her task, she won't notice Sucrose's investigation.

She has come up with some ways to quantify Noelle's behavior, although with as little experience as she has when it comes to socializing all she can really do is try her best.

One of the few hypotheses the alchemist can come up with heavily relies on her association to the Knights of Favonius. Envy is a common emotion and it wouldn't be strange if even someone as kind as Noelle develops it towards the institution, specifically towards the Acting Grand Master. If her objective is to get closer to Jean, one way to get there is to get closer to Sucrose first and as trust develops, be able to accompany her to the one-on-one meetings with the person in charge.

However, if it's a matter of faith, and Noelle's jealousy is born from the Anemo Vision that hangs around Sucrose's neck and not hers, then she may be interested in learning what traits allowed the alchemist to obtain such a gift.

Lastly, if for some reason Noelle is interested in the ways of alchemy to help her achieve some unknown motive, with Albedo being completely uninterested in matters unrelated to this world's discovery of truth, then Sucrose is the best next choice.

Despite being lost in her thoughts, Sucrose notices that the experiment starts on time. In fact, a few minutes early.

Noelle's sincere smile brightens up her day before the first rays of the sun, and the alchemist wonders to herself if choosing such an early hour in the morning wasn't a problem for her. The aspiring knight curtsies gracefully to her and as her heart leaps, Sucrose feels compelled to try and politely greet back in the same way, although the best she can manage is an awkward bow.

There are five boxes prepared, which means she has plenty of time to observe her reactions as they both walk back and forth. Noelle's muscles flex as she takes one box and stacks it on top of another, right before taking both into her hands. Sucrose's lips part in surprise, she's sure that the two guards at Favonius Headquarters could barely drag them out so how.. how is Noelle just perfectly able to pick up two of them like it's nothing?

How fascinating.

Her green olive eyes look confused at the alchemist and then back at the boxes, like she could probably take a bit more if she wanted to. Sucrose looks at her in a mixture of deep respect and blatant admiration as Noelle nods in her direction and starts walking.

She doesn't quite notice she's not following until the maid turns around, signaling with her head to go with her and she trots after her to catch up. Once they're

walking side to side, at the same pace, Sucrose gathers the courage to start her investigation.

"So, Noelle..."

"Yes, Miss Sucrose?"

"So, uhm..." Although she was the one who wanted to make conversation this way, nerves shake her stomach when she answers so gently. She looks up to the sky for an answer, "What do you think of the climate?"

Noelle's eyes don't drift skyward as Sucrose expected, but remain fixed on her—walking with such confidence, as if she knows every bit of Monstadt ground by heart.

"It's nice. An excellent day for walking."

Sucrose nods, happy to start the light conversation.

"What do you think of the Acting Grand Master?"

Noelle looks away for a moment, and Sucrose carefully watches every detail of her face, searching for any hint that might explain the sudden interest in her. But all she finds is a dreamy look and determination.

"She is my role model. She holds herself and others to

high standards, so I will have no complacency on myself until the day comes when I meet her approval."

Sucrose smiles helplessly as Noelle turns to her for a reply, which she offers immediately.

"I'm sure that day will come soon enough."

"Thank you."

Noelle's cheeks redden again and the alchemist looks away from her towards the boxes, carrying two at once while talking and walking should take some effort even for her. She's not sure if she should keep talking, but the maid looks at her expectantly and Sucrose ends up giving in.

"How do you feel about Barbatus?"

Noelle doesn't need to think it through this time, she just looks at the Vision around Sucrose's neck and sighs.

"Grateful, despite everything. I have my reasons for working as hard as I do, and having the freedom to do so is certainly almost as important to me." Noelle huffs a breath as they walk down the stairs to the plaza and Sucrose tries to slow her pace as they cross it "As someone aspiring to be a Knight of Favonius, I was hoping to have my Archon's Vision, but well..."

Sucrose opens the door to the alchemy shop when they arrive, inviting Noelle inside and pointing out where she should leave the boxes. Just a drop of sweat slips down her neck and she doesn't look really tired, but the alchemist invites her to sit down at a nearby table.

She pulls out the prettiest glass from the shelf to serve her water, and while she's at it, she decides to continue her conversation.

"May I ask for your thoughts about Mister Albedo?"

"Hm, yes, you may." looking up and down at the alchemist as she was steps closer to her, her cheeks lightly blush as she admits "Although I haven't given him much thought outside of the work I do for the Knights."

Noelle responds absentmindedly, accepting the glass of water from her. Sucrose tilts her head to the side, puzzled at her vague response considering how big an impact her mentor tends to make.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"I'm sorry, but the truth is that I wasn't paying that much attention to him. There was someone else I was interested in..."

"Someone else?"

It's a surprise for both of them when the alchemist asks. Noelle chokes on her water and then holds it close to her face as if she could hide her flustered expression with it. Sucrose's hands shot to cover her mouth, she didn't mean to pry like that.

"M-my apologies."

"It's alright, Miss Sucrose."

A quiet silence follows. Noelle steals a glance and takes a careful sip before replying "Aren't you going to ask me anything else?"

"Uhm, well..." If Mister Albedo didn't make much of an impression, perhaps little to nothing will remain for her... Still, it should be worth it, "What do you think of me?"

As soon as the words leave her mouth, olive eyes stare intensely at her. This time, it's her cheeks that quickly turn pink under her gaze as the seconds stretch on. Just as Sucrose is about to retract her question, Noelle gets up from her seat, a serious look on her face.

"The fact that you are asking me so many things... Does it mean that you are interested in me?"

Sucrose replies without a single thought.

"Of course. I organized all of this to talk to you."

Not just her cheeks, but her entire face explodes with color now that Sucrose has confessed to her little experiment. The aspiring knight approaches her slowly, like she's scared that a sudden movement will cause Sucrose to run away.

The alchemist dares not to move when Noelle reaches out to cup her cheek, and her fluffy ears flutter at the same quick beat her heart races.

"Can I?"

At her softly spoken words, Sucrose finds herself helplessly nodding again. Her caramel eyes reflexively close as she inhales the sweet fragrance of roses when their lips gently touch.

It's barely a moment, but it somehow feels like forever until her eyes open again. Noelle is staring at her again, olive eyes looking deep into her soul, in search of the answers that Sucrose's experiment has yielded.

The alchemist closes the distance between them again and she deems her hypothesis to be incorrect, although she now understands Noelle's motivations. In the future, Sucrose proposes to investigate some of her own.



To be together with you



Off Guard

by crescenttwins | ship: Rosaria/Sucrose

content tags: blood and injury, bad lab practices

Sucrose has loved dusk as early as she can remember. It's a time of transition, of transformation, and you can see it just as clearly in the sunlight as in the people in the market— the slow and steady wind-down, like a full throttle boil reducing to a simmer and settling. It helps, of course, that there were fewer people dawdling as the sun fell: Sucrose can restock her supplies for the next three days without hassle.

Now, one must understand that Sucrose has a certain... *reputation* in the market.

The bio-alchemist is only interested in things that were once or were currently living: flowers, fruit, bones and flesh. She is a creature of habit, appearing with her leather sack slung over her shoulder every third day after the sky settled in dusk. She will examine your stock quickly, pay you in exact change, fill her bag, and be gone before night falls. Early on, the merchants had joked that she was the return of the bone woman, who stole away the skeletons of

naughty children and carried them away in her heavy cloth sack. Naturally, such chatter had stopped once the eccentricities of the scientist had led to beneficial creations— things like sprays that maintained fruit's freshness without compromising the taste, or improved the yield from a single stalk of wheat— but in the rumors, that's how they knew her. The bone woman, who hid in her laboratory and took away bones to cook down or to piece together in the dark. The scientist in the Knights of Favonius who thought of biology as a puzzle to solve.

With that kind of reputation, it's perhaps no wonder that eventually, *other* markets began taking interest in Sucrose. Ones that were not precisely legal, spoken of only in undertones, where you could get *anything*. Markets with a representative that stepped beside Sucrose while she was purchasing a handful of hilichurl bones one afternoon, and offered her the chance to purchase monster parts for a convenient price.

"The staff of a Samachurl?" Sucrose asks, staring at the item in a cloaked man's hands. She doesn't know why the man is in a cloak, exactly, but it seems the kind of thing that is rude to ask. Besides, the staff looks to be in excellent condition— from a Dendro Samachurl, and even if the bit at the top of the staff is gone, the spiny thorns and wing-like leaves are pristine.

“I’ve heard you’re interested in *unique* items,” the man says, offering the staff to her again, “consider this a gift...of goodwill. For future transactions.”

The bio-alchemist considers this gesture to be quite generous, in truth. While the staff itself is unlikely to be a useful base material, using it as an apparatus for stirring might imbue the resulting mixtures with its residual elemental energy. Its Dendro attribute alone has already brought to mind a handful of variations on existing experiments, and Sucrose’s fingers itch for a pen so she can scribble down the thoughts before she forgets. But she’s aware that it’s impolite to ignore the man who is talking to her and offering...a rather fascinating item, all things said.

“What other kinds of things are you selling?” Sucrose questions, accepting the staff for closer examination. She doesn’t dare tuck it away into her bag until she’s certain of the level of damage; it wouldn’t do for the item to break because of an unfortunate knock.

“Why,” the cloaked man drawls, “what kinds of things are you looking for?”

Sucrose pulls a list from her bag.

Perhaps if it had been a less busy market day, one of the hunters would have drawn Sucrose aside and commented on how odd the cloaked man was. He had

yet to introduce himself, after all, and yet he seemed to know all about Sucrose’s purchases and research interests. The cloaked man had appeared only moments after Sucrose entered the market, and hadn’t spoken to anyone else or perused any goods. He hadn’t even turned to look when Brook had pulled freshly cooked skewers off of the stove, sending mouthwatering scents drifting through the area. It was clear that, whoever he was, Sucrose was his target.

But that was the thing about dusk, you see. People don’t dawdle at dusk because they’ve already had a full day; tired, they rush through their purchases or tasks, looking forward to the time when they can venture home and finally relax. So this conversation, strange as it is, quietly slips by anyone who might find it suspicious.

Instead, this is how Sucrose, Alchemist of the Knights of Favonius, becomes one of the most prized customers of Mondstadt’s black market.

Every third day, the cloaked man will find her while she’s shopping in Springvale. He’ll have crossed off a few items on her list, and will trade her a knapsack in exchange for her Mora. Sucrose will add a few more items back onto the list, negotiate the price she’s willing to pay for each piece, and that will be the end of it. A smooth, regular transaction that would be

normal enough if the cloaked man had a stall. Truly, it's not any different than Sucrose getting chased down in the city by an adventurer who has a fresh drop for her, so she doesn't think much of it.

The only odd thing about their interaction is that the cloaked man insists that they don't use their real names. It's safer that way, he insists, and Sucrose supposes that this creates what they call exclusivity. The same way the designers won't tell you which manufacturers they use to protect their production process, acquisition services must similarly be incognito. Sucrose is aware that she is a good customer, and he must want to keep working with her.

So Sucrose, to the cloaked man, becomes S. And the cloaked man just stays the cloaked man, because he needs no name- the quality of his wares speaks for itself.

Very professional of him, Sucrose supposes. She isn't truly bothered because the cloaked man is more than happy to answer any questions about the items she requests, and is very considerate not to ask her questions about how she plans to use them.

~

Sucrose is not a particularly pious individual. Given

that she lives in the city of Mondstadt, where the cathedral and statue of Barbatus are significant presences, this may be a surprise. But the truth is that Sucrose spends most of her time in her laboratory. Her days are full of questions and observations, of persistent experimentation until she has exhausted her supplies or her inspiration. Barbatus, the cathedral, *religion*- these are all things that Sucrose rarely has time to consider, let alone attend to. Sucrose has her Vision, and her science.

She performs science at all hours, which is why Sucrose finds herself blinking at the nun in her laboratory one morning, a few hours after midnight. Her cauldron is in its fifth hour of simmering, the liquid at the bottom finally starting to turn viscous, and Sucrose squints at it. There has been no explosion of the experiment, no unintended ingestion of its innards. The bio-alchemist considers the woman in her lab once more and then pulls open her notebook to check if there are any ingredients that would cause hallucination in the form of aerosol particles. Bioalchemy can be terribly tricky at times, and it's best to be sure.

Granted, Sucrose doesn't think she's done something to warrant the stern look on the other woman's face, but perhaps her subconscious is trying to tell her something. Sucrose isn't an expert on the human mind.

“Are you S?” The nun’s tone is low but stern, and Sucrose blinks at the question.

“Um, yes.” A bit of relief, to be honest, since this means that this is related to procurement of supplies rather than some subconscious scolding that she needs to attend more events at the cathedral. Sucrose would have to consider at a later time why she might have imagined this nun—tall and beautiful, sharp features, curvy, long legs clad in fishnets and belts—felt like a more appropriate individual to scold her than the more familiar Deaconess Barbara. She jots the question down so she won’t forget. “Do you have a delivery for me?”

“It’s taken me quite some time to track you down,” the nun says.

“That’s odd,” Sucrose replies, “since I’m usually here.”

Her guest lets out a short, barking laughter in response, and Sucrose feels so awkward that she forces herself to laugh a little too.

“It’s perfectly fine to call me S, if that’s your preference,” the scientist offers, “what shall I call you? Is *the nun* acceptable?”

“There is nothing I would want to be called less.” The other woman approaches Sucrose, heels clicking

against the floor of the laboratory and leans in close enough that Sucrose can feel her breath. “I’m Rosaria, a member of the Favonius Church.”

They’re using *real names*, Sucrose realizes abruptly. Oh, she must have come off as quite stand-offish then. “In that case! Um... I’m Sucrose, an alchemist of the Knights of Favonius.”

“It figures that the rot would spread in the knights,” Rosaria says, quite uncharitably. Sucrose is aware that she may not have the... social graces of some of the other knights, but her awkwardness surely isn’t bad enough to be called *rot*. “I would have expected some of the knights that patrolled the city, but—” the pointed claw of her finger traces the curve of Sucrose’s cheek, “no one would have expected someone like you.”

Sucrose straightens up, pulling her shoulders back. She might not be the most socially adept, but there’s no reason for a stranger to be so rude. “Excuse me, uh, but that’s not very kind of you. Nothing in my laboratory is rotting... well, except for my experiment on sustained freshness of local produce, but that’s very well contained!” Sucrose gives a discreet sniff to check.

“Please tell me that isn’t how you’re planning to defend yourself,” Rosaria says. “Give me some hope,

alchemist." Her face is very close still, close enough that Sucrose can see a fellow night owl in the bags under her eyes.

Sucrose sighs, and fetches her notebook on the produce experiment. She hefts it onto the nearby table, where it's far away from her simmering cauldron, and flips it to the relevant page, displaying neat lists of numbers and notes. "I am very thorough," Sucrose says. Although she can't help but feeling like the conversation has gone a bit off-kilter, this isn't an unusual feeling in the very early morning. In any case, she can review this conversation after her experiment has completed and she has gotten a proper amount of rest. "I can provide whatever accounting you need to assure yourself of my... lack of rot. Though, I hadn't been aware that the Church had taken over inspections. I must have missed the notice."

Rosaria ignores her words and leans forward, eyes reading over the pages quickly enough that Sucrose is half-tempted to offer her an assistant position; there is always more research to read and summarize, and a person with that skill would do very well in the laboratory. "I don't understand," the nun admits.

Sucrose sighs. It's normal enough, for a civilian without training, but still a little disappointing. "It's all right," she comforts, "not many do. Perhaps, um... if you have any questions, we can start from there?"

"What are you doing with the deliveries of monster remains?" Rosaria replies, and that is not where Sucrose would have started, but Rosaria is a novice in the scientific process. Some accommodations must be made, and Rosaria seems like the sort to be very diligent in what she puts her mind to. Learning is a process, after all.

Still! Getting the opportunity to talk about her research with someone who can provide a new perspective is very exciting.

"Well," Sucrose says, and grasps Rosaria's hand, dragging her to one of the bookshelves that line the wall. This one is half-empty, an indicator that it is reserved for the experiments that are ongoing and will one day need additional volumes. She pulls five tomes from the shelves, handing them to Rosaria one at a time, and then pulls her along to sit at the desk in the corner. The fact that it is the closest desk to her cauldron is, admittedly, one of Sucrose's reasons for selecting it: active experiments should not be left unattended. "I am invested in several experiments at the moment, focusing primarily on the effectiveness of monster remains in potion supplements for the Knights of Favonius." She points to the first book, a wide brown one that serves as her ledger for expenses. "My research expenses and sources of materials are listed here for your attention. The other four volumes consist of my most recent experiments that required

such parts, and– uh, well, they may be of interest, if you would like to focus on the specifics of use.”

They are still holding hands. Sucrose drops Rosaria’s hand quickly so the other woman is able to flip through the ledger. Even through the gloves, Rosaria’s hand was slightly cool and the stiffness of her calluses was offset in a very interesting way by her claw rings. Sucrose wonders if Rosaria will hold her hand again; it was rather pleasant.

Strangely, after flicking all of the books open, Rosaria doesn’t seem to do much reading before she deadpans, “Your source for the materials is listed as *cloaked man, Springvale*.”

“Yes, that’s correct.” Sucrose says earnestly, “Your colleague never provided his name, but don’t worry! I’ll be sure to enter your name properly for this delivery.”

“I only deliver judgment.” The tone is strangely incongruous with the rest of Rosaria’s speech thus far.

“Ah, I see,” Sucrose nods, “you’re here to ensure that I am using the materials appropriately, and judge whether to keep supplying me.” It’s a bit of an odd job for this time of the night, but perhaps Sucrose’s reputation for working late into the night is more well-known than she expected. She will need to be

careful for the next few days and make sure to leave early, or Albedo may force her on a... *vacation* again.

“No,” Rosaria says, after a long pause. Her lips press together, for just an instant, as though she is debating something, before she crosses her arms over her chest. “The man who was supplying you has been... terminated. You will no longer be able to use his services.”

“Oh, ah, what a shame.” It will be hard to find such a consistent supply of high quality materials, but no doubt there were reasons. Perhaps he was skimming funds, and that was why Rosaria needed to see Sucrose’s detailed ledger. Still, as a member of the Knights of Favonius it is important that she stays on the correct side of the law, even if her research may suffer a few setbacks because of it. “Thank you for informing me. I– uh, I can return the unused materials? If that might help?” She winces; even she can hear how reluctant she sounds at the thought.

“No,” Rosaria’s face seems softer somehow, tension slipping away from the edges of her eyes and mouth, “I’ve ascertained that you aren’t a danger with them.”

Which, of course, is the moment when her cauldron explodes.

~

They say you only understand a person after you've gone through hardship together.

Sucrose is... hesitant to say that an exploding cauldron counts as hardship, although it did require her to drag Rosaria to the wash station and pour a vat of neutralizing solution on her. The contents of the cauldron had been relatively innocuous, very stable until they crystallized. Other details aside, it was a sign that Sucrose should have reduced the fire when she noticed a guest.

Still, Rosaria seems to have taken the explosion as a step towards familiarity, because now Sucrose finds herself with an occasional companion for her evening experiments.

"Good evening, please wait for just a moment—" Sucrose pours the contents of her beaker into the cauldron, careful not to let the liquid splash as it hits the heated surface and splutters. The solution evaporates quickly, within a minute, and the residue left at the bottom of the cauldron is an unexpectedly bright orange. She lifts the cauldron onto a cooling plate, and grabs a spatula to scrape the residue out of the cauldron and into a neatly labeled vial. When she finishes, adding a stopper to the vial and setting it carefully in a stand, Sucrose turns to greet Rosaria properly. "Good evening!"

Rosaria is leaning up against the door, posture relaxed in a way that had taken several (non-exploding) visits to achieve. Even now, she gave Sucrose's tables a wide berth. "You said that already, Sucrose."

"So I did," Sucrose wipes her hands on a clean cloth. "But I was distracted the first time, and it's no effort to greet you again. Did you have a good patrol?" The nun's duties were quite diverse, as it turned out. While her only official title was from the Favonius Church, Rosaria also regulated evening markets and kept an eye out for trouble. It was no wonder her eye bags never seemed to go away.

"More peaceful than usual," Rosaria pushes off of the wall, "as long as you don't have any explosions planned for the evening." In the light of the laboratory, her movements are contained but graceful— a sauntering predator. She never seems to fumble anything: a skill that Sucrose would also like to recruit for the laboratory. But Sucrose is a considerate friend, who knows that Rosaria isn't interested in science; besides that, the nun already doesn't sleep enough. Lack of sleep is very detrimental to a well-functioning human.

"It only happens about 15% of the time," Sucrose defends. She tugs at the edge of her coat, suddenly conscious of the copper stain across it from a minor

spill earlier that day. Rosaria, even after coming off of these long patrols, always looks pristine.

“With the number of experiments you perform, that should be about once every few days, right? It’s in my best interest to keep an eye on a frequency like that.”

Sucrose flushes; she can feel her ears warm under her hair. “The damage is very contained, and, uh— well, I won’t argue if you want to keep an eye out but... I assure you that I am taking all proper precautions.”

“I certainly will keep an eye out,” Rosaria says slowly, and the way she drags her eyes over Sucrose’s form makes the scientist even more aware of the copper stain. “That aside, are you finished for the evening? I was heading to the tavern.”

“Oh!” Sucrose perks up, “The Cat’s Tail?” She admittedly had a bit of a bias towards the tavern, having spent so much time there during her observation of her potential relative—

“I prefer Angel’s Share.”

“Oh, I see...” Sucrose says, a bit disappointed. She starts her notes for this portion of the experiment, beginning to fill out observations of the crystalized substance in a neat hand.

“...I could go to the Cat’s Tail tonight.” It sounds like a question.

Sucrose looks up from her notebook, confused. “Why would you change?”

“You’re joining me, aren’t you?”

“Oh— well, probably not? I need to observe the behavior of this crystal for at least another two hours to ensure that it’s stable for the next part of my experiment. I don’t think the taverns stay open until that hour.” She yawns, thinking of the long night ahead of her. “I’d best head to bed after my experiment is finished, in any case. But I hope you enjoy your drinks!”

Rosaria sighs, muttering something under her breath that Sucrose doesn’t quite catch. It sounds something like *what did I expect* but Sucrose isn’t certain how that would apply in this situation.

Strangely mumbled words aside, there are other indicators that Sucrose and Rosaria are progressing to a warm and wonderful relationship. For instance, when Rosaria leaves, Sucrose now gets a hug. It’s a small bit of intimacy, Rosaria’s chest brushing up against hers as the taller woman wraps an arm around her shoulders and squeezes lightly. It’s become one of Sucrose’s favorite parts of Rosaria’s visits.

(... Although she can't help but wonder if it's not a subtle way for Rosaria to check her for injuries, based on the way the nun pats her down lightly after. Surely there's no other reason for Rosaria's hand to slip to the small of her back. And *honestly*, Sucrose takes laboratory safety very seriously. Rosaria really doesn't need to worry. One explosion and your credibility is lost, it seems.)

Sucrose pulls off her lab coat as she makes her way around the workbench, draping it lightly over an unused stool. The motion of getting reeled into Rosaria's arms feels familiar, like the exhale after a long day, and Sucrose can't help but hope that she never gets used to it.

~

Sucrose registers the smell of blood, metallic and pervasive, moments before she hears the door to her laboratory slide open. She puts down her beaker, blinking away the blurriness that comes from focusing too long, and twists to look at—

Rosaria, leaning casually against the doorframe, half of her form carefully out of sight. She doesn't let herself in, commanding the space away from Sucrose's cauldrons as she usually does, and instead looks a bit like... a bit like she's getting ready to flee.

"Rosaria!" Sucrose says, in what is most certainly not a shout, "are you— what is—"

"...Yes?" The taller woman seems calm.

Sucrose sniffs the air once more, and it makes Rosaria stiffen. "I can smell blood, Rosaria."

There's a moment where Sucrose thinks she's going to run, the observation a step too far over the boundary that's been carefully navigated over the past few weeks of their acquaintance. But she doesn't. Instead, Rosaria seems to sag against the doorframe like her strings have been cut lopsidedly.

Sucrose starts towards the place where she sticks her medical supplies for laboratory injuries, and turns on her heel halfway through— surely it would be better to get Rosaria to sit first, and then fetch the bandages. Perhaps it will be something that the deaconess can heal, if it's not too severe— except, Sucrose bites her lip, the Favonius Church must not be staffed at this hour, or Rosaria surely would have gone there first...? That would be logical.

She spins on her heel again, staring at the clock, and then turns to stare at Rosaria with wide eyes. Sucrose starts a mental run-through of the injuries she *knows* how to treat, and hopes Rosaria has one of those.

Finally, the situation processed, she moves to the door, and tugs Rosaria to sit at the table.

“Not to complain,” Rosaria winces as Sucrose lifts her arm to examine a scrape from elbow to shoulder, “but are you certain that your experiment can be left alone?”

Sucrose pats Rosaria down, focused. “Yes, there’s nothing at risk of exploding at the moment.” The nun’s legs are uninjured, Rosaria’s fishnet running smoothly over her legs without interruption. Her torso, also, seems to be fine; the blood smeared on her shirt seems to have come from the scrape on her arm. Her shirt is actually... strangely transparent, now that Sucrose looks at it, soaked with water as if Rosaria had—

“You washed your injury,” Sucrose realizes.

“As well as I could, given the position,” Rosaria waves her hand, “I took an unexpected hit, cut it on some exposed metal.”

“I see,” Sucrose says, and fetches her first aid kit. It’s fortunate that she, Albedo, and Timaeus had established early on to always keep it well-stocked. She drags the chest over, plopping it down on the table next to Rosaria with a *thud*, and clicks it open. Disinfectant potion, antibiotic cream, biocompatible

bandage gel, and cloth bandages to go on top.

Good, she has everything.

The smell of iron is not unusual in Sucrose’s laboratory, but it is normally the result of a very successful shopping trip. Despite the limb being attached to Rosaria, this is not very different than Sucrose working on a hilichurl bone with flesh attached. The procedure is clear, the materials are accounted for, and Rosaria is in need of care. Sucrose swaps out her gloves for a sterile pair, and then gently grips the inside of Rosaria’s elbow. She dabs the disinfectant potion carefully into the wound, apologizing softly when she feels Rosaria’s flinch, and gives it a moment to dry as she examines the injury for any small debris. The antibiotic cream is smeared over the wound next. As Sucrose presses gloved fingers against the swelling injury, she wonders if adding a cooling element to the cream might be beneficial for wound recovery. A thought for another day.

The bandage gel is derived from slime concentrate, purified several times and then neutralized so it isn’t harmful to the skin. Actually, it’s quite fascinating: by taking advantage of the natural motion of the slime concentrate, the bandage actually permeates throughout the injury and maintains a clean environment for healing until it is absorbed by the

body. Fifteen volumes of research to develop it, although it wasn't commercially viable.

Sucrose wraps Rosaria's upper arm carefully, tying the cloth bandage off so that it's not too tight, and then smiles at Rosaria. "If you sleep with the cloth wrappings on, by tomorrow the gel bandage will have set and you will be able to let the skin breathe. It's quite fascinating, really, but, uh— perhaps you should have a healer look at it, just in case? This isn't exactly my speciality, although it is a related branch of biology."

Rosaria sends her a wary look, "There was nothing experimental about what you just did, was there?"

"No, not at all," Sucrose reassures, "these are standard for all of the alchemy labs. Well, there aren't many alchemy labs, so I suppose it's just us. It's... standard for our lab though?"

Rosaria weighs her words for a moment, lifting a hand to caress the bandages. "Nothing too strange then."

The motion draws Sucrose's attention, and the alchemist frowns. "Is it hurting? I didn't add any numbing agents because it would impede the use of your arm, but if you'd like—"

"No," Rosaria says, "I would rather have feeling in my arm. There is something you can do, though."

"Shall I fetch you a glass of wine?" Sucrose asks.

That startles a laugh out of Rosaria. "There's no need to go that far, though I wouldn't reject it if you had some on hand. I'd like something a little simpler from you."

"I'll do what I can to help."

"It won't take much effort at all," Rosaria tips Sucrose's chin up with a clawed finger, "I just need a kiss."

"A—" Sucrose's eyes flicker to Rosaria's mouth.

Rosaria hums, letting the words settle for a moment, before she says, "You have to kiss injuries to make the pain go away, no?" She sing-songs the end of the sentence, bringing to mind the children's rhyme.

"Oh, yes, of course." Sucrose agrees, a little embarrassed at her own thoughts of kissing Rosaria's lips. Not that she would be opposed, but it seems rather... lecherous, in comparison to what Rosaria was actually asking. How silly of her. She leans forward to press her lips to the edge of the bandage, where she's

certain is far enough away from the injury that she won't hurt Rosaria by accident. Still, as she moves, Rosaria shifts too, and Sucrose feels the softest pressure against the top of her head, just below where her cap covers.

Rosaria doesn't say anything, when Sucrose sits back up, so.

"All done then," Sucrose states.

There's something very pleased about Rosaria's tone when she says, "My thanks for your assistance." She's smiling, just the slightest curl of her lips, and Sucrose kind of... wants to kiss her.

More observation will be needed to determine if this is a mutual feeling. Consent is important, after all.

~

A dull thud awakens Sucrose, head popping up from where it was buried in her arms. She fumbles her glasses, pushing them up her nose, and peers at the knapsack on her bench. She looks up at Rosaria, then at the bag, and says slowly, "You brought me something?"

Rosaria settles on the stool next to her, sliding the cloth bag over. "Heh... I wonder."

Sucrose squints at her, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, and considers the bag again. This is a present, she thinks. Combined with her continued observations—such as mood ratings, number of times Rosaria smiles in the presence of an individual, and average topics discussed—a gift is important. Significant. The inflection point of a relationship from friendship into love. Or continued, deeper friendship, Sucrose supposes. Depending on what's in the bag.

She fiddles with the latch, staring up at Rosaria through her bangs, but the nun doesn't get impatient with her. Rosaria leans her chin on a palm, eyes carefully drinking in Sucrose's reaction, but there's nothing nervous or angry about her demeanor.

Sucrose opens the bag, and finds—

A pile of bones.

Her eyes dart up to Rosaria's, because there's not quite enough words to express her delight at the gift. Because there are clear points of articulation on some of these bones, and no signs of traumatic damage. These are carefully collected, diverse enough that Sucrose can slot them easily into her skeletons and—

This must be love, Sucrose thinks. There is no other explanation for it. Rosaria knows her, cares about her interests enough to bring her a *perfect* present, and

Sucrose has observed Rosaria enough to know that she would... not be opposed to kissing, and spending even more time with her.

“Don’t talk to strange men for your bones anymore,” Rosaria says, “when I can get them for you more easily.”

Sucrose jerks forward, pressing her lips messily to Rosaria’s cheek. “I will put a heart next to your name in my supply ledger,” she promises.

Rosaria slides a hand along Sucrose’s jaw, tugs her in for a slow kiss. “How romantic.”





at noon a darkness fell

by Eternitas | ship: Jean/Rosaria

content tags: stabbing / homoerotic blood drinking / bastardization of Catholic imagery & Genshin canon

When Jean flickers, then startles, from sleeping to waking, the pigeon-throat quiver of candlelight against the wall seems for a moment to mean she's been caught. A torch, a prison warden's lantern, a sacrificial pyre—they burn saints that way, she thinks, and she was not named for a joke.

lux aeterna luceat eis

In the vase before the open window, a last few flowers are browning at their stems; in the candleholder before her, the tail of an ember shimmers, reflects in melted wax. She lifts her thumb to it, this dancer, this animal, this burning sprite—feels the nip of heat, and withdraws her thumb—lifts—withdraws—

“Captain?”

“Shh—”

Jean snuffs out the flame. No one is coming to kill her,

and her eyes blow wide and her breath pitches sharp and she snuffs out the flame. On a second call (“I’m coming in, Captain, alright?”), she makes the voice at her door out as Noelle’s and fixes her posture so that, as the maid walks in bearing tea tray and teapot, she sees Jean bent over the paperwork, one hand shading her eyes, the other around her pen, and nothing beyond this.

“I’m surprised you’re still here,” Noelle says as she refills Jean’s cup, the steam between them a momentary veil. “Maybe I shouldn’t be, knowing how tireless you are, but...”

It’s the last night of the week, Jean guesses, and supposes Noelle doesn’t see the point in continuing.

“Leaves me less to do on Monday morning. You can lock up without waiting for me—I’ll be fine. Thank you as always, Noelle.”

The steam fades onto Noelle’s pursed lips. “If you’re sure... don’t work yourself sick.”

It is too cold in this room. (The window, the damn window.) It is cold-cold-cold, and too dark.

“I’ll sleep in tomorrow,” Jean says, and smiles big and bright and sweet enough that Noelle shyly looks the other way.

“Goodnight, Captain,” she answers, cursory, then makes her retreat. A full three ticks of the clock fit between the shutting and locking of the door, a full sixty between the locking and Jean’s beginning to feel secure in her privacy, but she keeps staring straight ahead even after, refusing all movement save an occasional wayward shudder.

Jean thinks, *You are so in love with me, you dumb little puppy.*

Jean thinks, *You are so...*

Jean slams her head on the desk, groaning like death or estrus, and her eye twitch-twitch-twitches.

Sleep in tomorrow. Sleep.

Nights she so rarely sleeps but, when she does, her dreams are so still that the hours blur before they bleed.

~

“...so it’s not a vendetta,” someone is saying, too smug and too smooth—Kaeya. “Not revenge of any kind, and certainly not against the Knights.”

Not such a common word, vendetta, Jean observes from where she is sitting up but only incidentally

listening, her eyelids like iron curtains. There’s a fat black fly making a pilgrimage from her left to her right.

There’s another person talking to her left or her right (“...so sure of that...”) and it can’t be on purpose, the way their voice, too, spins, as if Jean were small enough to be carried on their breath. She shuts her eyes instead of looking, rubs her temples; the fly is on her ear now, crawling across her cheek. Then back into the air.

“...always happened, but this month already two...”

She’s read before about flies that sap blood from picnickers, flies that spawn motherless on cuts of rotting meat. Flies that live only one day, born at dawn and dead by dusk. The fly in this room will age a generation by the time it reaches the end of the table.

“...and now that shipworker, just gone overnight...”

But this is information from a long time ago, back when she could stomach reading about these things. It’s not even accurate, probably.

“...mean it hasn’t targeted any of us directly, archons, no need to get so...”

Sweat has flooded the valley of her collarbone. It

prickles. Badly. (*Buzz-buzz-buzz.*)

“...mass hysteria already a threat...”

She pinches her tongue between her teeth, forces her eyes open. (*Buzz—buzzzzzz—*) Her notes don’t have anything on them, except *vendetta* crossed out and rewritten three times, and now a puddle of ink deepening into a lake.

“...what Jean thinks. Jean.”

Who’s speaking?

“Jean!”

sanctis tuis in aeternum

She hears the bang of her palm splintering the table before she recognizes it as a sound she’d produced, and *that* before her gaze snaps upward to half a dozen pale faces.

It drifts downward. And *oh*, she thinks—there’s the fly. There’s the blood it lies in, dark as drainwater.

Only Albedo looks unsurprised, but then that’s Albedo. Survey the room again: Kaeya, rattled, leaning back in his chair; Noelle by the door; Grandmaster Varka with

brows raised and lips parted, as though to ask after her health, at the head of the table. Up and to the right of her, Eula tries and fails to mask uneasiness—she must have been the spinning voice, Jean decides, and really: It was so obvious all along.

“My apologies,” she begins, without clearing her throat, “my headache is terrible today. All your concerns are valid, and our priority, now more than ever, needs to be the trust of the public.

“I don’t have a lead on the disappearances either, but that’s why it isn’t my work alone. Kaeya, Eula—there’s little to lose from conducting an extra round or two each day, dawn and night, and making sure no one stays out past curfew. A mandate’s unlawful, but spread the word at least. Albedo, you’ve confirmed each civilian has at least one living relative, so better now than ever to start tracking them down. For my part, I’ll do what I can to join investigations and boost morale. And Grandmaster—thank you, truly, for your patience. We’ll figure this out.”

~

Sister Rosaria speaks with an accent; she has lived in Mondstadt at least twenty years, almost certainly longer. Under the stress of her pronunciation, consonants sharpen and vowels are trodden flat,

leaving even banal sentences with a flourish that stops just short of musicality. Hers is an improvised blunt weapon voice, a boiled cabbage with no seasoning voice, it is a voice that rasps demands and never compromises.

It is singing, now, in praise of her god.

lux aeterna luceat eis

Or in mockery of her god, or in praise of herself, or spinning a thread Jean couldn't fit through a needle for all the muddled rest of the choir. She shifts her hands in her lap at the same time Rosaria shifts—something, somehow, doesn't catch exactly what—in the folds of her habit, then goes on singing, perpetually half-lidded, movements perpetually languid. Not once does she reference the choirbook. And when Jean realizes she's been watching her closely enough to have even noticed this, a scowl instantly overtakes the veneer of hypnosis that no one, bless, had seen on her.

Because—really! Really. Of course she hadn't come to church at seven-thirty in the morning for Sister Rosaria, Our Lady of Stealing Communion Wine to Give the Stray Cats in the Churchyard and Stealing from the Donation Basket to Buy Cigarettes, then Chainsmoke While Watching the Stray Cats in the Churchyard Drink the Communion Wine She Also

Stole. Rosaria, taller than both the oldest and youngest Sisters, shirks her duties with such frequency that the far-right corner of the choir's back row is good as permanently vacant.

sanctis tuis in aeternum

But today it was not, it hadn't been, and this, Jean concludes, must be the reason the service is closer to finishing than starting and she's spent it hardly looking at her sister. Just shock from witnessing the paranormal.

quia pius es

Rosaria—

...is not singing what everyone else is singing.

Perhaps not even singing herself. Looking again, her mouth isn't opening nearly wide enough to accommodate the bloated vowels of a choral piece. That is, except now, when she tips back her throat, very subtle, and glances at Jean, her carnivore-teeth glinting in the sun through the picture window.

And glances at Jean?

No, don't think about it: She had glanced at nothing. Keep watching instead, keep listening, keep—*what* is she mouthing?

*lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine,
cum sanctis tuis in aeternum, quia pius es.*

requiem—

—that's it.

A chant for the dead.

Jean very nearly laughs. So that's the reason Rosaria is in attendance at all this morning: Someone wrangled her, pinned her up high like a taxidermy angel, and the rosy-fingered Sister who respects neither land nor language nor god had made the best of a bad situation.

If nobody else will pray for her, Jean won't either, but. Well. She'd hesitate, at least, before refusing outright.

Then "Jean!" her sister cries, and Jean rises less frantically than she'd feared she would to receive her.

"I made it," she greets, gentle, before Barbara can—pulls her into an embrace. "I'm sorry about last week, I..."

"Do you think my voice has improved? They always give me the highest parts, so I've been working on my projection. Oh, I didn't think you'd be in the audience!"

"No... no worries about that." Jean pulls away. "You sounded wonderful. You get better and better every day."

Barbara, golden curls slipping loose from her veil, beams. "Today was rough, but next week for sure—and Windblume's still a way off, I know, but you won't have to be up as early then—new pieces, too, I'm so sick of these—oh, Sister Rosaria!"

Jean presses down the cold shock she's too strong or stubborn to fall prey to, feels only dread in its place. There in the far-right corner, Rosaria pauses from descending the choir steps. Her shoulder's already turned in preparation to shove open the exit door.

A moment's hesitation, then a couple hasty steps, bring her to Jean and Barbara, and Barbara wraps an arm around Rosaria to close the distance even further.

Rosaria doesn't flinch and says, "Hey." Of all the things to say!

"It's been two weeks since Jean last came," Barbara prattles, "and, um, longer than two weeks since you did, so that's halfway to forever since you two were in the same room, right? How fun!"

"You..." Jean's eyes flick between the two. "...really

shouldn't make a habit of that. Skipping morning prayers."

Rosaria is not rude enough to yawn but not polite enough to pretend she doesn't want to. "It's *been* a habit, Ms. Knight."

"Ah. Well. That's."

"Will you join us for breakfast, Sister Rosaria?"

"They give better food to prisoners and slaughterhouse pigs. You know I can't keep any of it down."

"Really? I've never seen you eat, not even once! How do you stay so strong?"

(That might be a smile thawing on Saint Emphysema's lips. Jean isn't sure and, at any rate, it vanishes.)

"Thank you," Jean says, "Barbara. And Rosaria."

The choir has completely gone, suffusing the chapel in their absence with dust and lingering body heat. Jean dips her head.

"I have to get going, but I'll see you both around, okay? Next week, Barbara, I'll be here."

It's punctuated with a smile, big and bright and cavity-sweet, which Barbara notices but hesitates to acknowledge and which Rosaria seems to have ignored entirely. Jean repeats, quieter, "See you around"—gets no response that time, either.

Sunlight dribbles in through the picture window. Rosaria's fingers twitch at her sides, and Jean thinks, *I will never pray for this woman.*

~

"Captain!"

"Great to see you, Captain."

"Barbatos bless you, Captain."

"Best of the crop for you, Captain, and at half price."

"Captain, how about a peach?"

"..."

"Good evening, Jean."

Good evening, indeed. And some miracle that Albedo greets her at all, because today marks a veritable lifetime of weekly visits to his studio (this remote,

ramshackle place, this junkyard island on the edge of town) and not once in that tally has he turned to look at her when she walks in.

But that, anyway, is neither here nor there. Summer's a distant memory, so the thickness of the air in here—odorless, except some herbs and flowers cut and dried—soothes her by way of evoking absolutely nothing.

"Your order is almost done," Albedo says, and now he turns—slightly, so that she sees a flash of his profile. "Give me a few minutes."

There's nowhere to sit. Jean studies drawer labels while Albedo begins grinding camphor into paste.

"When I suggested you track down those civilians' relatives," she says, "I knew you wouldn't actually start anything. At this rate, though, do you think someone else will take me up on that anyway?"

Chalk, talc, arsenic. "I wouldn't count on it. Do you already know the rumor going around?"

Mint, opium, belladonna. "To the—in response to this? The disappearances?"

His answer is a heartbeat off from being immediate.

"The current theory posits something inhuman as the culprit. To that end, something nocturnal and blood-drinking, void of any moral code, possessed of a magical ability to breach locked doors. Vampire's a common word."

"Damn."

"What?"

"Sorry, I'm looking at your sketches. Are these all unfinished?"

The white noise of work resumes. "More or less, and I intend to keep them that way. Are you worried?"

Are you, he says, not aren't you.

"I've been trying not to think about it," Jean replies, lifting her charcoal-smudged thumb; Albedo starts a fire and its light glints off the gray.

"But now," she finishes, "I think I might... have an idea."

Every new ingredient Albedo adds to the mixture bubbles softly, hisses louder, all the way up until the last, which writhes between his tweezers. He drops it in; it dissolves; the elixir runs black, black as pitch.

He splits it across seven vials, cloaks the vials in canvas, and hands them to her all at once.

“Be careful, Jean,” he says.

~

One Sunday later and Jean is leaning against the weathered side of the church, holding a cigarette.

“How can she stand these things?”—a question which seems well beyond the point—and then she realizes she’s muttered that out loud. A cat peeks up at her every now and again, fat or famished or slim or silver-eyed. She exhales smoke, the smoke clears, the cats clear; and doves, never too near to her, murmur low in the dust.

Of course she picks today not to ditch, Jean reminds herself to think and not say, just as two slender fingers reach out and pluck the cigarette from her.

Jean follows the fingers up to the arm, black sleeve up to the black veil. The wan and exhausted face peering out from under the veil.

“So,” Rosaria says.

Jean glances behind her, like there’s going to be anything. (The churchyard cats, drinking wine from a

saucer.) Then slowly back.

“...so?”

“The Knights patrol at this hour, you smoke like the cig is going to bite you, and you’re about a decade too old to rebel just because. What do you want from me?”

Like a bell is rung: Jean straightens, recites her script. “I wanted to take the time to thank you for looking after Barbara. I’m not around nearly as often as I’d like, so it means a lot to us both.”

Rosaria takes a drag. “Let me repeat myself. What do you actually want from me?”

Reflexively, Jean flicks her fingers. Realizes too late that she’s got no cigarette for the ash to fall from.

Realizes, too, that Rosaria is now smoking the cigarette with her spit on it, which is—disgusting. And something else. Disgusting, mostly.

“Er. I’m *actually* here to ask if you’d like to come over for dinner sometime.” She cringes. “To thank you.”

Rosaria isn’t looking at her.

“For. Looking after Barbara.”

Silence, close to perfect, mingles with a whisper of leaves tumbling down the alley. Rosaria blows one-two-three smoke rings.

“Do you think I’m a slut?”

“No. I—what?”

“Anyway, why should I?” She studies Jean, moving only her eyes. “I’m bound to the church all the time. I’ll be in church next week.”

“You ditch all the time. I don’t see how an evening in the middle of the week should be any different, in your view.”

“What an unrighteous suggestion for the Captain to make.”

The sense that Jean’s getting played for a fool heightens such that, as her blood pressure rises and brows draw together, she feels like a wounded deer.

“Yes, so you know I have authority in this country. Isn’t your soul obliged to spread goodwill wherever it can?”

“My soul belongs to Barbatos, and He wants me in church next week.”

“Don’t be so churlish.”

“Then, ‘I piss holy water and this makes me unfit to be out in polite society.’ Is that any better?”

“And you accused me of acting like a teenager?”

Again Rosaria takes her time, lets the rare victory of indignation hang there and settle, and not until she’s ground out her cigarette on the stone beneath them does she answer.

“I never did such a thing,” she says coolly. “You, Ms. Knight, shouldn’t make a habit of spreading falsehoods.”

She turns to face Jean at last. The hunter’s hands falling over the deer’s eyes.

“Sure, I’ll have dinner with you.”

~

In ill-kept gardens along the water she sees her, in open-air markets and beneath bell towers, entering or exiting the library strangled cheek to jowl by ivy and outside dive bars that close at one but keep their lights on until three. She sees her flanked by cats on the street after the rain, in the sun on a merchant’s roof napping.

How the bishop still finds excuses for her, I'll never know, says the fruit-seller to Jean, and I'd never let that terror around my children, says the perfume-seller, and bitch is holding em all ransom, I'm sure of it, the alcoholic with empty bottle and missing shoe chimes in before the carpenter across the avenue beats him off, saying she just frightens me, you know, just frightens me the whole trot back.

Jean's fist dents the cellar wall.

"Do you see?" she hisses. "Do you? Do you?"

The shipworker quivers, the paperboy curls half-hysteric into his father's arms. All the rest sleep, or pretend to, and Jean's boot-heels ring *click-click-click* to the tune of a leak in the ceiling.

"They all hate her," the mantra becomes, "they hate her, they hate her, and I'll bet you my lung, my leg, my liver that no one will defend her when these missing civilians turn up, years of victims bled dry, her name written all over."

Barbara's smiling face appears to her then, and so she carries on, saying, "Barb's too *soft*," even though no one had asked: "Only person in Mondstadt willing to extend her any charity and even that is a house of cards. She'll—yes, yes, Good Sister Rosaria's arrest will break her heart, her chosen family turning out to be a

The end of the cellar is before her, the wall inches from her face.

"Rosa. Pale Ro-sa-ri-a. Never prays, never eats. I need her to cooperate." (The livestock know better, now, than to make noise; turned away from them, they all but disappear.) "I've got her, I've hooked her, I can't let her..."

Ruin it.

(Today. Earlier. She had gone to the church-run orphanage and asked to browse their archives, where she found, between year X and year Y, the class photo featuring that poisoned saint. Bad lighting, sun-damaged sepia—and Sister Scapegoat in front, pre-growth spurt, arms slack, knees scraped, eyes staring a thousand yards. Rosa. Röslein. *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.*)

~

Jean spends no fewer than ten minutes deciding which record to put on for the evening, then goes back to fiddle with it, anyway, in intervals of mounting anxiety between adjusting the heat on the stove and taking care that nothing has burnt. The current concession is a piano solo, unspooling in a minor key. She hates it; she chops scallions.

On the table already, in scant lighting from a few candles: Steaks, medium-rare and medium-well; rosemary potatoes; leafy summer greens peppered with mushrooms; forks and knives and two—she stumbles, catches herself—two wineglasses, which she had filled with too much cabernet, possibly too much sedative. Over it all, that awful, droning music. Will she even have time to switch it again?

She goes on cutting, speeds up, and forgets to move her hand, and it is at this moment that the doorbell rings.

lux perpetua luceat eis

Jean looks up. She looks down at her hand.

“Shit.”

Bandages, are there bandages in the kitchen? Of course not, and of course the distance from the kitchen to the foyer is too vast to justify any extra stops, provided she wants to be timely. Keep Rosaria waiting and the woman might suspect Jean is trying to poison her, or something.

So—nothing will do. No bandage at all. Once conversation has gotten underway in that dim dining room and Rosaria has had just enough to drink, she

won’t get another chance to notice the (archons, stinging) cut.

She isn’t even a vampire, to begin with, thinks Jean, and opens the door.

Her guest waits, dark as a stranger.

“Evening,” she offers, but Jean isn’t ready to hear it: She presses her index finger over her cut where Rosaria can’t see, Rosaria who has arrived in suit and trousers that fit remarkably well for their shoddiness. It had never occurred to Jean that she might wear her hair short.

“Everything alright?” is what she says next, hands in pockets and cocking her head. Jean has begun to wring her own hands, compulsive, like a peasant girl seeing anything.

“I... yes. of course.” She gives a warm southern smile. “Come in.”

Because Rosaria does not comment on the interior of her house, the candles, the food, the music, the not-cheap, not-new wine—does not do anything uncharacteristic except gaze hesitantly at her soiled work boots crossing into the foyer, the sole scrap of her outfit not hinting at formality—they make it a

third of an hour through dinner with the frigid cordiality of their greetings still intact.

Blood flowers on Jean's napkin, and there's an old-dog look in Rosaria's eyes, when she tries at last: Opens, "I've walked past you a few times while out in town," as Rosaria drinks.

In response, the dull thud of the glass being set down. Jean continues: "But never out of uniform. Unless I'm mistaking you, but at this point, I don't think I could. Is there a reason you dressed up just for tonight?"

She had considered *Are you even allowed to?*, but strong experiments run one stimulus at a time.

Rosaria brings a hand to her temple, rubs, and sighs.

"Is this an interrogation? Sure, I'll play along. This is a family heirloom I'm wearing." (Jean could tell.) "I have worn it maybe twice in my life: When I was fifteen or sixteen—I don't keep track of these things—and pleading my case as a reformed thief. A few years later, when I was still certain I didn't want to get married but thought it might be fun to go around pretending I was. And now—I forgot. This is the third time. You invited me, so it's only polite."

It's unclear to Jean whether this answer goes off-script or not.

"Sixteen... that would be quite a while after you moved here, then, right? You would think everyone knew you were with the Sisters by then. Unless you were stealing from them, too."

"I was."

"Oh."

"Well, not really." She folds her elbows on the table. "I wanted to scandalize you again."

"That only keeps working because I have no idea what your personality is supposed to be."

"That's only fair, isn't it?"

"Er..." Rosaria is eyeing her wineglass with what could be newly realized distaste, the sight of which puts Jean off just a little. "I don't think it is. Point being, nobody has any idea what your personality is supposed to be, and it has some of us—well, me, I guess, for the sake of complete honesty—thinking there's something else behind it. Like something you're..." Don't say *hiding*, do not say *covering up*. "...like. Like there's something more to you."

Any reason to have killed.

"Friend, not everyone who doesn't fall over

themselves to kiss your feet is traumatized. I have as many good memories of home as of here, and of here as of home."

"What about bad memories?"

"The weather was pretty miserable."

Jean squints at her and comments, "You could stand to be more open," the demand hidden in the suggestion.

Rosaria's fingers tighten until they run white around the stem of her glass. "Am I a charity case to you? Is that what this whole setup is? Because you grew up with private tutors and a horse in the yard, and my village shows up in textbooks for getting burnt down and no reason other than that."

"No, that's not..."

"I owe nothing to my upbringing, except my ability to look at things and then step right over them. If I were really traumatized, I would walk out of your house this instant and it would be justified."

Justified?

How *nice*, Jean could spit back, twice as acerbic, to

have really grown up. How sweet to lie on death's doorstep, having outlived no one, saying 'How nice to have lived': to relish in having lived, not living, ongoing, a tunnel with no light and therefore no end.

Rosaria's breath hits the shell of her ear. She takes Jean's wrist, easy as a ragdoll's, and smears the blood of her cut across Jean's cheek.

"Don't feel too bad about it, Captain. Is that why you've eaten so little? I thought the food was delicious."

The red stain on the napkin, so briefly a petal, has swelled to the size of a fist.

"And the wine would have been perfect," she says, "if it weren't for the laudanum."

The stain keeps growing, growing beyond itself. Jean heaves, trembles—can do nothing else.

~

This is not working.

~

This will not work. Why had she, desperate sure, panicked, but never before this stupid, ever believed it would?

Out the door with no destination. With the sea for a destination, were drowning not unromantic (were an attempt certain to do anything but leave her cold-cold-cold). That part had taken no more effort than blinking, the initial prey-brain switch between freeze and flight, the mad dash down the hallway, so it is the immediate present now giving her all this trouble.

Rosaria could have attacked her, she thinks.

And would have attacked her—*should have* being no question, damn it to hell, a man dying of thirst could figure out the wine was too bitter—and ought to have subdued her, at bare minimum taken a candleholder to the back of her skull. Why hadn't she? Jean's vision swarms, splinters, isn't a Sister bound by civic duty to snuff out the demons of the world?

She veers into a park, then into some undergrowth off the main trail. Striking again and again the kindling of her palms and holding them to her face. This has never felt like anything but it has always worked, because she sees humans doing it constantly—mother to a child, woman to a lover, hands warm and warm and warm and alive—and the hot-knife agony of want is so potent she's convinced herself her own hands are anything but unfeeling marble.

Little by little she breathes delusion into life, and her breathing descends from rabid back to merely agitated.

lux perpetua luceat eis

—she's hungry.

The thought, like all other thoughts, comes slow and distant, as if received through a paper screen. Feeling of decay pulsing at her wrists, ankles, ribs.

She'd burned too much energy between the stalking and the dinner. Lack of foresight will do that to a beast. But how far away the house is from here, the cellar with its lot of moaning livestock—what if Rosaria stayed behind after she ran out, now infesting the place like a black widow in the pantry? Waiting in the closet with the dagger, in the bathtub and by the window?

There's movement up ahead, scent, a blur of dull and earthen color.

Jean realizes she is following it before she realizes, or before the self-preservation instinct jumps awake.

Warmth, warmth, warm and warm and alive. Her lips peel back, her tongue runs along the stone's-edge of a fang, they're so close—

Someone tackles her.

Down. To the grass. Her arm is wrenched back with a sound of cracking, butterfly-pinned,

the hunter's dress shirt not a bit stained.

They wrestle. Not much of a fight.

"Fuck you," Jean pants.

Rosaria grins with all her blunt gray teeth.

"O Dandelion Knight, you're nowhere near as pleasant as people say."

"I apologize if four centuries and counting makes a woman *unpleasant*."

After a stubborn couple of seconds, she stops resisting, and Rosaria stops pushing down quite as hard. Observes the enraged face, heaving chest, sweat beading at brow.

"You're pale as a sheet," Rosaria says, like she's observing the weather.

"Am I?" Jean glares. "Well, why could that be?"

The leaves fall in earnest, swept along on a wind not from here. Rosaria's lips twitch into a lighter smile, then into speaking.

"Why are you so pale today?" 'Because I made him drink of stinging grief until he got drunk on it."

"Are these words I should recognize?"

"Maybe not. There are bards where I come from, too."

"Well." She budges her arm; Rosaria doesn't give. "Thank you for that, but if you have nothing more to say to me—"

"So what is your reason for going on like this? Ask any citizen to carry out Captain Jean's wish to be euthanized and they'll turn it into their life's purpose. And don't play dumb—you've been seeing me this entire time. There's something."

Ha. Not like Jean hasn't herself pulled this same trick.

"My sister," she says, the truth. "She loves me."

"She's your real sister?"

"Whatever 'real' means." Tries to scoff but her voice breaks instead. "She's human. Daughter of my father's son's son's—you get it. And she doesn't know."

Slowly, Rosaria frees her arm, then puts her own arm around Jean to sit her up. "Damn secret that is."

"Yeah. She likes you, a lot, and I'm glad she has someone like that. I wasn't lying. About that part."

"I like her too."

“Mm.”

“What, thought I didn’t?”

Jean sniffs. “Hardly know you. Could have been a great pretender this whole time.”

“You have so little faith in me, Miss.”

“Suppose so.”

Hard to imagine there was ever anybody else in this park, which the cleanness of night smothers so completely. Every streetlight flicking out.

Rosaria’s voice: “Is Barbara really the only one? Thought you’d also care for the people of Mondstadt or your father. You know, if you’re going with noble causes.”

“People fawn after anybody with enough life experience to know how to make people fawn after them. None of that is real. And my father, well. If you mean the first one, there was a plague when I was born.”

“And it got you both?”

“It got everyone.” The next part she braces herself before spitting out fluid and sudden. “Doctors tried

blood transfusion on me and a few others—just bloodletting in reverse, nothing they had done before but with the success of everything else, they figured, nothing that could put them in a worse position than they had started from. They did it, thought it failed, and when I woke up I was underground, where they buried me with the rest. All of us still alive.”

Rosaria’s face catches between wonder and caution. “Did that not scare you?”

Jean shakes her head.

“The singing.” She looks up, not to look but to remember. “I didn’t believe it at first. They had made a mistake, was my logic, and someone would hear or feel us and dig us back out. I held out hope. And then that requiem, *O Lord may everlasting light shine upon them*. They started singing it, and all of us went quiet instantly when we heard. Stopped screaming, stopped crying. Even the young ones. They really thought we were dead.”

It is the thousandth time she’s recounted this story. Maybe the first time she has spoken it. Which should be hard to imagine, too, at least strange to imagine, but the longer Rosaria keeps touching her, the hand coarse and callused, imperfect, but alive, the simpler it gets. It is the simplest thing in the world.

“You’re strong,” Rosaria tells her, “to have endured that.”

Not *I’m sorry*. Jean could laugh. She could cry.

“It was four centuries ago, Rosaria, I learned to deal with it. If I were really still traumatized, I wouldn’t have tried so hard to ruin your life for the sake of prolonging mine.”

Rosaria smiles again, more tonight than in twenty years.

“I’ll tell you what. If you agree to it, I can feed you. Call it Barbatos’s will or my own kindness, for once.”

Her exhale is low and whistling, like blowing out smoke.

“I’ll cut my arm for you. I’ll let you bite my neck. Whatever you want, as often as you need it. Meanwhile, I won’t speak of this to anyone, and you can go on being Jean or Captain or big sister or whoever. I can do this all for you, as long as you don’t attack a single other person. If you do, I’ll kill you.”

And Jean is less than animal again, less than a child, alone with the moon and her bones prickling exquisite under the skin. “Really kill me?” she says softly.

Rosaria considers this. “Cast you out,” she amends. “Like a leper. Or a lamb. I’ll lead you as far as the border—I won’t follow you any farther, if you’re good. You are never to return to Mondstadt, and if you do, I’ll kill you.

“Though knowing you—” looking Jean up and down and up again, where she fixes her gaze, “—you’ll sink to your knees, all on your own, and beg me to make it hurt.”

~

Jean unlocks the cellar door and tells them they’re free to leave.

They murmur to one another, speaking down the line of bodies like they all didn’t hear, and one by one their faces, so long drained and withered, light up.

Jean visits Albedo’s studio on the edge of the town and tells him he doesn’t need to worry anymore.

“Here’s mora for the rest of the year,” and she throws onto the table a sack of coins that spill out gleaming. Albedo looks like he’s on the cusp of a response. Doesn’t open his mouth, in the end, and nods at her with halfhearted finality.

Jean visits the Knights's headquarters, where Noelle is sweeping the hall, and tells her she'll never amount to more than a servant. When Noelle claps her hands to her mouth, crying "Captain!", and Kaeya and Eula slow then pause from walking past, Jean shrugs, just shrugs moving backward, turns to exit but is blocked by Varka.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asks, close as he'll ever get to a proper demand. Jean stares at him, then shoves her way out.

Last of all is the church: Choir practice, twilight of the afternoon. Barbara sees her standing clear-eyed in the pews, walks to her, Jean grabs her wrist and pulls her outside into the blue-white sun.

"Jean?" she asks, and Jean throws her arms around Barbara, her cheek to Barbara's shoulder. Squeezes with unmoored force.

"I know," Jean says, though she can't think straight enough to be certain what it is she knows.

Barbara writhes a little, her arms jutting. "You're hurting me," she says.

Jean shudders a teary breath. Doesn't squeeze any tighter—doesn't loosen her grip. Crushing suspended in pure gossamer. It's just this once, anyway, just this

one time. The first and last, and never again.

~

She does not carry a weapon. She is outside, unhidden. The last lit room of the convent, yellow in gloaming, has a vase on the windowsill identical to the one in her office: Five or six or seven flowers, one or three or all of them wilting.

Slowly a nun's silhouette passes, and then—hush—out goes the light, and slowly again the curtains draw shut.

In young and uncivilized times, such slowness meant the plague was already inside you.

~

And inside the hall the curtains are all billowing,

and inside the hall the doors are all shut,

and at the end of the hall one door,

claw-marked and claw-loved,

sighs open just for her.

~

Jean does not look first to Rosaria's bed, because she knows it is empty, and she does not look first to the vanity, though there is a person standing before it.

But she does look, eventually: She has no weapon of her own, her hands are empty as the night she was born, and eventually she has to look. When she sees it, she lunges, and when she lunges, she lunges too late, knowing all along in her animal brain that she would.

Rosaria whirls around, seizes the cross on her necklace and uncaps it, and the blade that emerges blinds in the dark.

She bows her body,

LUX

unstrings,

PERPETUA

drives blade into heart,

LUCEAT

drives all her aching weight forward into Jean

EIS

until they are both by the window, beneath the curtains, the curtains which sometimes hide their bodies curled into one another like deer or like wolves or like a deer and a wolf that may have held each other, once, just like this, before the ringing of the bullet made all the crows scatter from the pines, and sometimes reveal them.

And Jean thinks, *I may die*. And Jean thinks, *I will die*.

And Jean's teeth chatter, breaths come ragged, the moon reflecting off her eyes shines dull as a dwarf star. In Rosaria's hand glints the blade, now so red.

"Poor Jean," she coos. "Poor baby."

And beneath the curtains, Jean almost dies—

and the curtains fall, and the blade wavers in Rosaria's loosening grip,

and the curtains rise, and Rosaria slits her arm, straight slash up the wrist,

drinking deep—

and beneath the curtains, she holds Jean's body, holds her mouth over Jean's like suffocation,

pouring blood, pouring her blood in rivers dark as wine.

Jean twitches and twitches, rigor mortis in reverse, her fingers twitching and then her hands and then her arms, shooting up to grab Rosaria and pull her into that enfolding thirst.

She drinks and takes and drinks until she is full and drinks until she is sick and drinks until she is healed,

and she shoves off coughing and coughing and coughing and coughing.

And beneath the curtains, Jean does not die. She even lives.

~

And Jean thinks, *I am*, followed by a word that blazes like fever.

~

They take a carriage no farther out than the border. They begin walking.

In the morning they will have more to say to each other, when the unspoken vow sealing their voices cracks and then shatters. Their temporary language, which could just as easily be an immortality shared between them, is of touches—so that when Jean leans into all of Rosaria with all of herself, because the dawn

is soon and she doesn't have elixirs, anymore, to save her from burning, Rosaria understands, and lies them down in the time-tossed grass.

"What was the rest of that poem," Jean whispers, "that you read to me when I thought I hated you?"

From memory, Rosaria quotes it—

"How can I forget? He staggered out,

"His mouth twisted in agony.

"I ran down not touching the bannister

"And caught up with him at the gate.

"I cried: 'A joke!

"That's all it was. If you leave, I'll die."

—but here she stops. She watches Jean, who watches her expectant as a child—who asks, "Is that all?"

Rosaria threads Jean's hair between her fingers, cat's-cradle. "No," she says, "and I know how it ends. But what do you think happens?"

Nearly a perfect question. Jean thinks about it.

He stayed, of course he would; or else he would leave, throwing her headlong into grief, and she would wail until the whole feeling earth bent in towards her—then one day he would return, the exact way you stabbed me and then brought me back.

She says, “Not everything has to have an answer.”

And they sleep.





salt and shark teeth

by Mina | ship: Kokomi/Raiden Shogun Puppet
content tags: inferiority complex, gratuitous ocean puns

The Shogun encroaches Watatsumi like a bane – she brings roiling dark clouds, and Watatsumi itself dulls in her presence. The sunlight is phlegmatic, dripping through the cumulonimbus like thick mucus, rippling reds in the evening (like blood sluicing off her naganata, a languid slide off her blade as she cruelly slits orobashi from gullet to guts, all for giving them a chance).

The Shogun in herself is tall, clean dread with nothing behind her eyes – a bit character, someone that makes Kokomi seethe with each graceful, oil slick step she takes, one step in front of the other. She smells of salt, there's a sweet undercurrent to her that's so unlike the heady ambergris popular on the island. There's a pause, and the blank salt rimmed expression clears as her head turns to absorb the surroundings.

(her gaze brings anoxia, and kokomi's nails dig into her arms as she feels her mp leech – this is something she has to deal with; she has the upperhand here.

watatsumi is hers.)

The facade of amiability clicks into place as naturally as ever, the most useful piece of equipable armor; her lips curve sweetly and her eyes crinkle at the corners as naturally as it would when meeting a friend as she inclines her head in greeting. The Shogun stares at her in disinterest, glances at a wayward bird as it easily glides past with a tattered, barely there interest, and it's more attention than she can apparently bear to deign Kokomi at the moment.

"Welcome to Watatsumi," she says with measured ease, the Shoguns disinterested gaze passes by her meaninglessly, landing on one of her guards, before focusing on Kokomi once again. "I hope your first impressions are pleasant?"

"For an island of heretics," the Shogun starts, an empty thing, her lack of emotion grates on her ears, a rusty saw – she doesn't even have the interest to pretend. "It's aesthetically fascinating."

Kokomi's nails break skin.

~

Watatsumi is Orobashi's gift to their citizens; its beauty is unparalleled compared to any other of

Inazuma's archipelagos, and Kokomi can see it even in the Shogun's empty, empty gaze.

Kokomi was raised into this greatness – Watatsumi is the best and it is the greatest to behold, and Kokomi is heir to everything it has to offer, which is why she must take care of it so diligently. It's the thing she thinks of in her dreams, surrounded by waves, the comforting feeling of the roar of waves in her ears and clouds of white bubbles frothing from her lips.

It's why Kokomi has no qualms with the way villagers spit at the Shogun's feet.

Kokomi is their everything, it's proven in the way they croon her name in their whispers – Kokomi, the greatest; Kokomi, wonderful and with a ravening intellect; Kokomi, who will be recorded in history books as the best, a ruler and a priestess and a household name – Kokomi, a benediction to all that dip their toes into her waters. It's why they give her that little doubtful look, so easily assuaged and assured with a plastic smile. Any arguments they have bloat in their throats and die belly up, the only remnants being the fetid glares they send to the Shogun.

The Shogun's stone face doesn't crack, there is no angry roiling, no sea in a tempest. There is nothing.

Maybe she is something to marvel at on the main islands, this dead figure, driftwood in the shape of a woman, drenched in frippery in hopes that she could be something to admire. Every line of her soft face is etched into features, neap tide and base, not an inch of the personality that Kokomi had worked years to perfect. It aggravates Kokomi more than she would like to admit, that someone may have a better poker face than her, that she could flounder in front of this woman with not even a whelk of personality.

~

The Shogun kneels at the delegation table with a careful bend to her knee, and when she braces her seaglass wrists against the dark wood, Kokomi stays standing for a lingering moment, because somehow she knows this will be the only time the Shogun will lower herself before her.

Kokomi primly takes her seat, and the Shogun's lips part (apples are an import that Kokomi favored before Inazuma closed, and she thinks of them now, the Shogun's lips red like blood, like smashed ikura; red like the result of foolish pride. fruit knocked from the tree too early.) before closing once again thoughtfully.

"What is it that you need?" The Shogun asks, and her voice betrays nothing except boredom and annoyance.

“Quite an impolite way to start a meeting,” Kokomi says, her voice welcoming and charming; an angler’s lure.

“You,” she starts, as if clarifying a misunderstanding, and Kokomi wants to scream — ‘you’, as if Kokomi isn’t the most brilliant mind to ever come out of Inazuma, as if she doesn’t think in layers and mazes and as if the world isn’t a complex game built for *her* to win. The entire shogi board is laid in front of them, but the Shogun refuses to play along — resentment simmers, her heart thunders as if it’s on the verge from erupting in apoplexy, it darts into her expression quick as a sprat, and she schools it down with difficulty. “Are the ones who benefit from *our* help, not the other way around.”

Her retinue seethes behind her, and Kokomi is buoyed; she calculates, lets her shoulders sag meekly and hears the predictive hiss of distaste.

“I see,” she says, a trifle lamely, covering her grin with dainty fingers and watches — and Kokomi does watch closely, waits for her to clam up, wonders how this would be from a different angle of approach — but the feigned hurt solidifies the nasty images that are surely floating in the guards’ minds, they’ll squall and kick up a fuss and secure themselves under their precious, precious, priestess’s thumb all the more for it.

The Shogun tilts her head, indolent. She rolls her wrist to signal Kokomi to move on.

Distantly, she thinks that maybe they are playing two different games.

~

The Shogun looks different at night, beautiful — Kokomi may drape herself in tennyo garb, form the ribbon of an apsara over her shoulders in the mockery in true reign, but Kokomi can not take to the sky, as waterlogged as she is, and Shogun will always be more than her, no matter her history or breeding. The thought makes her squirm internally.

She feels small and wan, like she’s being drowned out by a brighter star — dulled by the glittering refractions of the moon on the nearby pond on her skin. Kokomi shifts her oil lamp to her other hand, and while no one had specifically told the Shogun not to wander in the main yard, her presence outside Kokomi’s window makes her itch.

Her hair falls like spilled ink over her shoulders, and Kokomi is reminded of how she’s gone toe to toe with her army, how she’s poured over papers and thought of plan after plan to combat her forces, and stands tall.

“Do you fight, Sangonomiya?” Shogun asks, before Kokomi can say anything.

“I merely make strategies,” Kokomi says, peering through her lashes. Shogun’s lips purl, ever so slightly in distaste, and Kokomi flinches back. “My battles are not physical.”

Her disappointment seems tangible — makes something in her seethe in an anxious orbiting cluster, a school of fish lathered into a panic.

“You are a child playing pretend,” she determines, and Kokomi’s cheeks burn.

“I fear that you do not recall your place,” Kokomi says, simpering in her rejoinder, purposely mean since there is no one here but them. “Please recall that we are on Watatsumi, not your playground of devils.”

“Little girl playing general,” Shogun continues — commandeering, condescending, *ignoring her* — and as she turns Kokomi’s eyes land on the gentle bell of her hips, the hilt of sword strapped to her waist, “You have no strength to show for it; your people would be no worse off having read storybooks instead. They have managed through luck rather than actual strategy. They put together information you regurgitate without understanding and praise you for it, despite that being of their own merit rather than yours.”

“I request that you return to your room now,” Kokomi’s voice floats like jetsam to the water’s surface as she smiles vacuously, resisting the urge to scream.

“I had expected more,” the taller woman says, almost plaintively before she makes a chuffing sound, a pale imitation of a laugh, “But how rueful, there is nothing here that can stand the test of time.”

(kokomi is reminded of the ocean, salt water and sea breeze, and something inside her aches, agitated in her stomach like a cyclone. it’s fine, still, because the ocean will wear down obstacles and smoothens even the most ragged stone to their liking eventually.)

~

There is a child who does not know — he bounces his ball and the hard rubber smacks against the Shogun’s ankle as Kokomi gives the grand tour that was briefly discussed over Kujou Sara’s last visit.

The Shogun stares at him, the guppy stares back, and Kokomi — despite all her dislike — does not want an incident to occur because of a child. The Shogun’s lacquered fingers curve at her chin, something unfurls in her eyes, a flower that has never seen the sun stretching its petals for the first time.

"The person I care for the most," starts Shogun, and Kokomi suddenly feels so stricken, hearing this woman talk about caring for others, this unfeeling monster, "Used to bounce these things around with her sister all the time when they were newly made and untroubled. What is the purpose of this? I have never understood."

The child beams bright, sun rays refracted on the water's skin, and Kokomi feels very, very lost when the Shogun continues to loiter by his side, taking his interest in children's games and melding it with metaphors of war that have him sticking his chin up in pride despite her blank face and monotonous voice.

They don't finish the tour before eventide and Kokomi doesn't suggest they finish it another time, but Shogun doesn't seem to care about anything Kokomi does in the first place, so what does that matter?

(she's unstuck, and when she gets a hold of herself that night it feels like it will take every status potion in her disposal to restore her pride.)

~

When the Shogun leaves after a week of liveliness that can put a wall of plaster to shame, she inclines her head politely and says, "It's a shame you are all so enamored with the idea of worshiping a corpse."

Kokomi titters, and as the Shogun steps quietly onto her ferry, Kokomi hopes she drowns on her way back.

~

Kokomi equips her gear — novels to replenish her energy, all her skill points invested in charisma for the day. It's her turn to visit the Shogun, a signal flare of goodwill.

Kujou Sara is a fool, easily tricked, with equally brainwashed sycophants at her aid that dart around the boat like medaka in an aquarium's toy castle, moving fleet and rocking the boat with each step. She's a myrmidon who found her footing through pining and bullheaded determination alone.

She stands next to Kokomi politely, at a respectable distance and Kokomi picks at the thoughts tangling in her skull like seaweed.

"Seeing the Shogun when arranging the pax was certainly an eye opening experience," she throws the line, watches Sara's eyes widen as she closes her teeth around the bait. "Is she normally so," she picks at her words like a child trying to avoid vegetables at the dinner table, "Dignified?"

Sara preens as if she were the one complimented — and conversation escapes her mouth like shoal from a

torn net, overflowing in a deluge of pride, with Sara herself being anchored by her affection for her god. She stands taller, tilts her chin, and she has to bite the corners of her inner lips to keep herself from grinning in her excitement.

“Your Excellency,” says Kujou Sara, a gleam in her eyes reserved for the Shogun and the Shogun alone, one that makes Kokomi feel disgustingly small, makes her angry for no reason, “The Raiden Shogun is perfection personified. Inazuma would not be the same without her.”

All Kokomi hears is that she will never match up, that even with all the gifts and praise and legacy under her belt, the Shogun could so easily crush them under her heel.

~

The Shogun’s place of residence is large and grand – Tenshukaku’s doors open like the lid of a coffin, the walls tower high and arches over the surroundings like a mausoleum for the dead. The air around her smells mostly like hot metal.

Kokomi is beautiful – she is well aware that she’s unmatched in intelligence, but the feeling of being lesser makes her wobble as if she’s unaccustomed to being on land; it would make sense. This is not her territory after all.

That woman is smiling. She has never smiled through all of her trip during her stay in Watatsumi. Her smile stretches sweet and her silks corrugate as the Guuji Yae curls over the Shogun like she owns her, drapes herself over her like that is her rightful place, moored to the ruler’s lap. It’s unprofessional, it screams disrespectful – Kokomi is being looked down on, again.

Yae leans in close to her ear, mutters lowly in a way that makes the Shogun look alive, in a way that makes Kokomi feel unfairly robbed.

On Watatsumi, the Shogun would never allow herself to have a single hair out of place; on Watatsumi, her eyes didn’t scythe in a way that drew blood. She didn’t leer at her like Kokomi and Kokomi alone was a particularly aggravating insect – her apathy had been for everyone, her disinterest hadn’t been cut with something mean until now.

Emotion swells in her, leaves her overwhelmed, and when the Shogun calls her, *little girl*, it’s backed with a mocking little sneer and none of the objective neutrality that she once spoke with, and humiliation submerges her.

Her teeth nip into her tongue, though she can’t manage to bite hard enough to bleed and it makes something curdle in her gut. She’s a child with no strength to show. For anything she’s achieved.

Kokomi teeters and totters home, fish out of water, land-legs amputated.

~

When Kokomi sees her again, that titter is out of her mouth and the cats-purr sweetness has dissipated. She's dead and stone, wooden and lacquered over to protect from wear.

"You aren't smiling this time," she says, accusing.

"She may have whatever she pleases, and I will go through any tribulation to give it to her," the Shogun says, each syllable measured out, perfect. The way she speaks now reminds her of Kujou Sara. "If she wants this mien fixed in a certain way, it will be done, because she deserves it. Not that I have any control over such trivial things."

"Letting me know that the Guuji Yae is your weak spot doesn't seem very smart." Kokomi drops her armour, it falls to the ground like a gaudy festival mask after all celebrations are said and done. Kokomi is no game master — she has no hitbox, no MP, no stamina points. She's an adult with shoes too big to fill, stuffing empty space with tissue and meaningless fluff. She's smart, she's good at reading people, she's good at reflecting an image of herself that people want to see, the ways people want to react.

(people, not gods. Kokomi will have to try a different tactic, because she's the brain of her army and there are no holes barred in a war.)

"I have no love for the Guuji Yae, however indispensable she is." Says the Shogun, but the end of her sentence pitches up, as if amused or curious.

Kokomi scowls at the blatant lie, pressing into the Shogun's space. The Shogun's eyes are brighter this close up, an imperial purple for the empress of eternity — violet and violent are just a letter apart, and Kokomi is suddenly, achingly aware she's pushing her luck, but the Shogun only tilts her head robotically, does nothing but wait. "You make me feel humiliated just standing next to you."

"I don't understand how your emotions require my attention," she says softly.

"You'll learn," Kokomi says assuredly, she's always been determined, and there's a thumping in her chest telling her not to lose, sparkling when the Shogun's eyes narrow. A reaction, she got a reaction from her finally.

"Will I?"

Kokomi grins, it splits across her face, showing teeth — unladylike, but there's no room for manners in war,

and Kokomi refuses to feel off-footed and *lesser* ever again.

“I am the Divine Priestess of Watatsumi, I’ll make sure to take up all your attention in the future, peace talks or not.”

The Shogun blinks, slowly, considering, then turns her head back to the stacks of papers in front of them. “It will be entertaining to see you try.”





primavera

by Rii | ship: Shenhe/Yun Jin

content tags: grief/mourning, angst with a happy ending, family, food as a metaphor for love, character study, shenhe-centric

I.

Stepping out from the haze of clouds that wreath Mt. Aocang's peaks feels like waking from the longest dream.

(You are sixteen, an age where you are still far too sentimental for your own good – head filled with far more stories than sense.

As a child, you thought that if you reached out far enough, you could pull clouds from the halcyon sky to fashion a fluffy cloak about your shoulders. It would keep you cool in summer, soft enough to rival Master's silken feathers – refreshing as the air currents she keeps flowing to soften your fall.)

Now, the sun has long burned away the comforting blanket of fog – and perhaps with it, your common sense. The sun's starting to set, lingering on the

horizon: a mourner unwilling to bid their beloved goodbye, bittersweet farewells still lingering on their tongue like medicinal herbs.

Even if night is beginning to draw up its tenebrous curtains, studded with the quicksilver gleam of stars, you navigate the shortest route to cut through the peak's labyrinthine paths with ease.

*Dream no longer, dear child, the wind seems to croon.
The hour of waking is upon us.*

Before you know it, you find yourself standing before the gutted wreckage you once called your home. Snow drapes itself so heavily over the plum tree outside your shattered bedroom window that you fear it will never bloom again.

The building itself looks unsightly as a wound. Perhaps even looking at it should land like a punch to the gut, and yet – you feel hollowed, emptied. Numb to the frost that creeps across your fingers, to the wind that whines like a stray dog begging for scraps through the gaps, starving for more, more, more.

At this point, it's more skeleton than structure: holes in the roof clumsily patched through with crumbling straw and rotting thatch, creaking boards groaning under your weight – clearly on the verge of collapse.

Damn pawnbrokers didn't even have the decency to leave a single trace of your childhood behind, huh. There wasn't even a chair for you to sit at the creaking kitchen table for a spell and imagine: your parents were simply hard at work in the garden out back — set to return at day's end.

(*Aiyo, you imagine your mother teasing, her eyes bright with mirth. A crooked chain of wildflowers would crown her oversized sun hat, courtesy of your father. A-He, my little crane. Aren't you a little too old to be playing pretend?*)

Tang-popo's still the spitfire you remembered her being as a child, hunched over her stall with a scowl sharp as a knife: defending her prices from potential hagglers with a ferocity that's made many fear for their life. Her eyes are the color of embers aglow in a tray of ashes, a perfect match to the pyro vision fastened around her neck. And yet — she used to sell fried tofu to your mother at half-price.

Now, she's watching from her stall — wary eyes burning a hole into your back.

A-Ling's the gutsy little girl who would always pester you to correct her sword stances, clinging to your ankles like a koala — except only half as cute. (You told her this once, and she wouldn't talk to you for a week.) You'd subjected her to your first pathetic attempts at

braiding hair in exchange for those weekly training sessions. Even now, she still hasn't grown out of fondness for *youtiao* — she's frequenting the stall as you speak.

... By now, you must look the part of a stranger: hair dyed the color of clouds, sharpened polearm sheathed at your side. That... *has* to be the reason why she passes you by with a grumble, not even sparing you a second glance. Right?

(. ... Ah, who are you even trying to fool? ... That careful reverence — that feigned civility would hurt less if they screamed it from the rooftops.

Here, you're a fox among finches. Try and assimilate all you want, but you'll never find a place to belong.)

Now, the wind is howling through the hollowed remnants of — ah, can you really call it home anymore?

Home is crouching among the golden glow of Qingyun Peak's buttercups, inhaling their sugary scent with a sigh. It's decorating Moon Carver's antlers with clumsy wreaths of violetgrass and qingxin — that is, between bites of bitter flowers and his half-hearted complaints.

At seven, home is in the barely-contained chaos of

Master's workshop, where she squawks like a startled hen at your antics: spilling ink over intricately crafted blueprints, staining your only set of clothes, and pressing brightly-colored buttons at random on her latest inventions – bored to tears from her ceaseless chatter.

Home is curling up beneath the brilliance of Master's plumage as a child, sheltered from a sudden storm.

Creaking branches, groaning wood, and a whispering voice. That's all it takes for you to realize – you know where you belong. You turn your face to the sky, desperate for a distraction. It's starting to snow.

It's only when you return home that you realize you're shaking. Even though Master fusses over your sudden departure – typically pristine feathers ruffled from relentless winds, striking up a fire with a litany of muttered complaints – she still keeps you company at the strangest hours, where the world is suspended between early morning and late night.

Master doesn't know how to cook home-made meals, but she's started working on a device that can do so in her stead. Master can't sing to save her life, or lull you to gentle dreams with the cadence of her voice. Master can't dress you up in the latest trends, or accompany you through the chaos of a festival crowd.

But she can stay, just like this – a steadfast reminder. Just like this, with a comfortable silence settling around your shoulders like your favorite cloak.

Warmth everywhere: the golden glow of sparks and a struck match against the shadows. (You're not sure, exactly, how Master manages this without opposable thumbs, and yet – you're far too exhausted to dwell on the details.) Instead, you close your eyes and listen.

The quiet crackle of dancing flames echoes in the expanse of a cleaned-up cavern, long repurposed for sanctuary against storms. It drowns out the snap and snarl of the snowstorm raging outside, muffled by the soft glow of talismans carefully penned in ink.

Above all, here is a steadfast promise – an unspoken oath. It lingers in the air like an incantation – cutting through the stillness like a spell. (Master speaks in a whisper, but you still hear it all the same.)

Can you see it, unfurling like dawn against the dark?
Can you hear it, ringing sweeter than any song against
the silence, clear as the chime of a bell?

Listen close, and listen well:

You are not alone.

II.

You are walking along the water's edge when you first hear Yun Jin's voice.

(At the water's edge, where the horizon dips into the depths of ink-dark waves, you begin to wonder. Treading on the border between immortal and mundane, you want to know if you'll ever find that same certainty. All you've ever wanted is something like a compass needle to steer your aimless wandering, or perhaps the distant gleam of a star to guide you home.

You could never crave qingxin as Ganyu does, bounding up steep cliff faces with the grace of a half-qilin; nor could you retain the same distance of the adepti to worldly affairs.

All it takes is a glimpse of golden custard tarts for you to get a craving, and before you know it — you find yourself wanting more: lingering in the warmth of a scallion pancake stall, basking under the crimson glow of paper lanterns.

Grandma Tian always tries to coax you to stay a little longer with the promise of seconds, like you're another of her strays she's slowly starting to tame. One of them's named Baozi, whose fluffy white fur always sticks to your sleeves. He always hops into

your lap, shameless, and paws at you until you give him chin scratches. ... As much as you try to deny it, you're seriously attached.

All you want is to feel welcome in your own skin. If coddling a cat's what it takes, well... You're not complaining.)

Her voice rings out with the slow, inevitable surety of the sun — climbing through the autumn skies with the swiftness of a swallow, brilliant notes piercing through the chaos of a thousand crowds.

It is not mere acting that draws your half-lidded eyes to the teahouse, nor the fluttering flags mimicking the movement of flames. It is metamorphosis, plain and simple.

The central figure onstage has shed their form: renouncing their identity to play the part of the *dan*. They straighten with the regal bearing of an empress. With a flourish of her fan, she displays a cunning nature — fit to outpace the second-rate schemes of covetous concubines with ease. She lowers her lashes to suit the whims of a coquettish courtesan, coyly hides her face behind the folds of her flowing sleeves.

When she emerges, they whirl about her like woven wings.

With a snap of her fan, this simpering sweetness is shed for the stateliness of a handsome young scholar. His voice is no longer silken. Instead, it sharpens to the point of being shrill, breaking at points to indicate his youth, smoothing out with the artfully executed acrobatics of the *wusheng*.

You admire that unshakeable confidence in her ability to play so many distinctive characters, stalwart as a covenant of stone. If you were to take up another role, where would you even begin?

Would you play the part of the little girl who listened to the fading footsteps of her father, trembling in the face of a god who yearned to swallow her whole? Step back into the shoes of the sacrifice, who armed herself with her only keepsake — her mother's exorcist's blade — and readied to strike?

Or would you masquerade as the wandering woman, who returned to the ruins of a teahouse she'd once frequented as a child? She knew its halls by heart — could recognize its most frequent patrons by voice.

She had been friends with the owner's daughter, A-Ming, who'd weave flowers through her hair with a wink. She would crown A-Ming queen of a far-off kingdom with a circlet of silk flowers, and A-Ming would secretly use one of her family's heirloom swords to name her knight.

She remembers glass glittering at her feet like unshed tears. And yet — with her soul bound by crimson constraints, she couldn't even find it in herself to feel even an echo of grief.

III.

From afar, Yun Jin looks delicate as a porcelain doll: painted with a careful hand, as if ready to perform any time, anywhere. She cradles her teacups with both hands; takes dainty bites of the pork buns she'd ordered for the two of you, painstakingly neat.

And yet — illuminated beneath the stage lights, there is an unmistakable ferocity to her briskly executed strikes. Her footsteps whisper across the stage, her spear spinning whirlwind-swift at her command. Every moment sings of calculated strength.

Timed to the rapid, percussive swell of the *bangu*'s drumbeats, the bright, brazen boom of a struck gong heightens the frantic pace of the battlefield. With the clamor of clashing cymbals, Yun Jin brings the guise of a seasoned general to life.

Granted, they're a showman's strikes: each mock blow lands in time to harmonize with the bright clamor of cymbals. And yet — they still cut through the crisp midwinter air with the precision of a carving knife: jabbing forwards to meet her adversary,

somersaulting back.

Enter Yun Jin, center stage. She spins her spear through the air in near-perfect sync with her body — twirling it two-handed, then one-handed. She tosses into the bedlam of a mock battlefield, sidesteps an enemy soldier's advance, and then — brandishes the polearm by her side with a flourish, unhurried but brisk.

Still, beneath the flamboyance of those artistic flourishes lie sound foundations: solid as the promise of stone. All rough edges sanded to smoothness, at the cost of calluses earned by the break of dawn. There's a reason why steel sings at her command, be it spear or sword.

Is it strange to find beauty in that brutality — to find artistry in the arc of her blade?

You have lived and breathed the phonemes of force from childhood. Violence is the only language you know — you've rehearsed it countless times, verse by brutal verse.

A second's hesitation meant a wandering Fatui agent's smoking blade at your jugular would surely sizzle through tender skin, striking true. In the breadth of a heartbeat, a primo geovishap's concussive blow could easily shatter bone: brittle as a branch against a

storm's barrage, bracing for impact.

(Don't you know that gods and monsters haven't enough mercy in their hearts to spare? Foolish mortals who walk towards hell on their own two feet shouldn't expect to flee unschathed.

Little girls who get caught in the crossfire either crawl from their chrysalises, tears still drying on their cheeks, or forever lie in the graves they've dug for themselves — crushed under the weight of their own half-formed wings. ... Like hell you'd let yourself die in the depressing darkness of a corpse-laden cave.

Maybe it was because six-year-old Shenhe had a stubborn streak a mile wide, and a dream that could only bloom under halcyon skies.

See, you promised to thread lavender through your mother's hair. Grow enough that she could catch wind of them, even in restless dreams. So even if she was wandering in the dark, she could still follow those flowers — blooming from hill to horizon, pervasive as perfume.

And if you ever wandered too far from the village path, the crystallflies would flutter among the endless amaranthine flowers, swaying in the wind — starlit chaperones escorting you home with a dancer's grace.

... Even now, just thinking of it — you can't help but laugh. It sounds like something from a fairy tale — like fabric spun from dandelion fluff, falling apart with a touch: thousands of wishes, so easily scattered by the wind.

You hardly stay in place long enough to learn the local shopkeepers' names, much less spend hours tending soil rife with overgrown weeds and wriggling worms.

... Strange, then, that the gentle aroma still drifts its way into your waking dreams. Like nostalgia — like smoke, catching hold in the fraying fibers of a well-worn childhood coat — it lingers.)

Come Qingming, you will visit your mother's grave with freshly-cut chrysanthemums and a bouquet of lavender. The hazy aroma of incense would curl around you with the contentment of a kitten, sweet and familiar like a half-remembered dream. You'll bow three times. Pluck weeds and clear away stray twigs, telling her about the most spoiled cat you've ever seen.

You'll leave still-steaming dragon's beard soup at the altar, careful not to spill a drop of her favorite dish. Grumble half-heartedly about that one overly affectionate grandmother, who keeps insisting on accompanying you to feed the city's well-coddled population of stray cats.

With the way she keeps plying you with leftovers from her marketplace stall, you're starting to believe she's mistaken you for one of them.

You'll save the best for last, of course — filling her in on the songbird that has stolen your heart, painting the barren snowdrifts of your life all the brilliant colors of spring. Hum a merry melody from one of her latest operas under your breath, a faint song among the bright chatter of finches. You wonder if she's listening.

(As a child, you were too busy sneezing up a storm to enjoy the scenery. And yet — ah, how could you forget? Ma loved to see the world all in bloom, just like this: proud peonies beginning to emerge from their leafy chambers, citrus-scented magnolias starting to unfurl in all their majesty.)

Long ago, people used to believe the gates of hell drifted open on this very day. That's why people fly kites during the Qingming Festival — sending greetings to the fallen with brilliant colors, praying their promises will be carried on the wind to the dearly departed.

... Maybe you'll say hello to your father, just this once — more in farewell than forgiveness, you're beginning to realize. If you had to put your words to paper in the form of a subpar script, you would have crossed out a

thousand lines by now — hands covered in so much ink.

Enter, stage right: a daughter. The hour is early. The sky is painted with a careless hand: swatches of orange collide with candied pinks and glimmering golds.

The daughter rescinds her identity for the role. What use is a name in this village? Hardly anyone here remembers the sound of her voice — save for an uncle who was never good at letting go. Her ghostly-white hair and blood-red ropes sets her apart from the other visitors, dressed in more muted colors. She stands before two empty graves.

A DAUGHTER: Goodbye, Ba.

The daughter pauses, turning to look at the sky above. It is bright and it is blinding, a perfect fit for its namesake day. Somewhere, among rows of well-kept gravestones, a little girl is wailing as if deprived of her favorite toy. The daughter's eyes are dry as dust. And yet —

A DAUGHTER: [closing her eyes] I used to follow you through the market with sparkling eyes. All aglow like the baubles that caught your gaze. You wanted to bring a bracelet home for Ma, or maybe an earring to match her eyes. But you were always terrible at choosing, weren't you?

The daughter laughs. If sentimentality is a disease, then she's long been infected. Waxing poetic about long-gone days, bidding the man who walked towards hell on his own feet — dragging her along for the ride — farewell!

Seven, look at her now. It would be so much easier for her to resent him, and yet — and yet... she couldn't even summon vitriol to ignite the unfaltering monotone of her voice.

A DAUGHTER: [curling her hands into fists] ... Hey, tell me. Was it a hard decision, setting aside your daughter to give your wife another chance at life? I... do I really want to know the answer? ... No use dwelling on it, I guess. Not that you'll ever... Ah, forget it.

... Oh. That's right. Remember that one Mid-Autumn Festival?

You'd answer my every question with patience and a grin, and we'd walk through the dark hand in hand — crimson lanterns aglow in the dark like night-blooming flowers — with three sticks of tanghulu. One for me, one for you, and one for Ma, who was waiting in the doorway with eager eyes.

... I can't forgive you for ruining my favorite festival snack, you know. It just doesn't taste the same without the three of us.

Even now — no matter how much syrup I ask the vendor to drown it in, tanghulu still tastes more bitter than sweet.

Exit, stage left: a mourner, emptied of her farewells. Soon, the incense will go out — extinguished at the whims of the wind. Soon, that little girl will leave with her mother, hand in hand, and wonder about that woman in white.

She'll mumble that the daughter looked like an adeptus, perhaps — a spirit carved from the likeness of ice and snow. But the look on her face — that grief... why, it was an expression only a mortal could make.

... A face only a mortal could make, huh.

If the daughter ever caught wind of that little girl's words, she'd laugh for a good, long time.

IV.

Seven steps through sheer white snowdrifts is enough for the cold to sink its teeth into your bones. You'd think a cryo vision would be enough to stave off the snap and snarl of a sudden wind at your back, but no. Sometimes, you seriously wish you could wind the clock back so that you were never born under such an ill-fated star.

And how strange — that is, you can't remember if you're ever shivered like this before. How long has it been since you've caught the pleasant, yet piercing perfume of snow-dusted spruce at full strength, or followed the smoke-laden traces of a guttering campfire through endless white?

Sure, glacial gusts might be cutting through the layers of your clothes with the cruelty of a carving knife, but you haven't had such control over your five senses since you were, what... coherent enough to still your shaking, sweaty hands around an heirloom sword: clawing your way out from the grave your father had dug for a family of two.

In the distance, you catch sight of a plum blossom in full bloom, bright as blood against a vacant canvas: painting it in all her colors.

You remember this story. Yun Jin spoke of it with a faint note of amusement in her voice, steam drifting from her cup of tea like a sigh. She smiled as she reminisced of the story that broke her bottleneck, back when her characters began to blend together in a monotonous haze.

“Snow Treading” was an opera that wove the tale of an arduous trek through endless snow.

She had pictured it in her mind's eye so vividly, you

see, that it came alive: the sharp crunch of densely-packed snow underfoot; the dull ache of hours of aimless wandering, worn down to the bone; the fleeting feeling of snowflakes landing on her cheeks, softly like a slowly-melting kiss. A paltry parting gift, in the face of freezing to death — but a comfort, nonetheless.

(Yun Jin laughed, clear and chiming. Bright as the crisp notes of a cleansing bell, leaving you refreshed. *That is how it is, with the art of unbecoming. It's akin to... ah, how should I say this...? Shedding one's skin, Miss Shenhe.*

It's spinning a cocoon with your own two hands, crawling into the shoes of another with the grace of a caterpillar — and praying you emerge from that makeshift chrysalis ready for flight.

Listen. Her father's low voice, rising and falling like flames in a winter hearth: *You mustn't be afraid to explore every aspect of your character, A-Yun. If you want to convince your audience, you must first convince yourself.*

The sugary-sweet giddiness of a first love; the choking haze of an incendiary rage; the sheer, leaden weight of guilt — embrace each and every emotion with open arms, but never let it consume you whole.

Look: the once clear-cut path through the woods is now blanketed by blinding white. The sight does little to quell her mounting despair, rising in her like a colossal wave. How long will her soul wander alone among these solemn cypresses, until the crimson glow of a lantern will guide her home?

It's not an unfamiliar scene, come to think of it — even if it's woven from the fabric of a freshly-written fable, paper still soaked with the sheen of still-drying ink, it brings back faded memories of your youth to mind. The glacial wind — sinking its fangs into your mind and marrow — is brutal and blameless as a half-starved beast: leaving you hollow and half-emptied.

It cleaves through the shimmering fabric of sentiment, carving through halcyon merriment and sunless melancholy alike: a condemnation, perhaps. A graceless slash of ink across a carefully cultivated garden of brushstrokes, an owl's calamitous cry cutting through the night.

Here lies a wound that still weeps in the dead of winter, a mourner clutching freshly-cut chrysanthemums for the funeral rites of their lost youth. Paper-white petals flutter, falling to the ground in lieu of tears: fractured promises dancing through the air as they descend, destined to never bloom again.

After you had your fill of Moon Carver's (depressingly accurate) portents, you were desperate for a less ominous reading of your fate. Instead, you took to the city streets: coins singing in your pockets, hope hastening your pace. A wizened fortune teller traced the blood-red ropes that bound your heart with a shaking, gnarled hand and called it salvation.

And so — somewhere between the brittle bones that caged your heart, you found yourself daring to hope. A feeling as pervasive as perfume, rising from joss sticks before the altar: sustenance for spirits, a prayer left to pay one's respects.

Where does that so-called salvation leave me, you wonder. Damned or divine? More spirit than sinew, more ethereal than flesh and bone? To the untrained eye, you must look the part of an adeptus — hair blanched as bone from a single brush of a sacred comb, dyed in all the hues of heartache. White as a weeping widow's robes, the muted hues of mourning.

Praise overflows from the lips of mistaken adherents, rapid rivers branching from the same tainted source: rumors running rampant, as always.

You're undeserving of that starstruck reverence, and yet — you've long given up on denying your divinity to that little exorcist, moved to tears. He would have

fallen prey to a rapidfire barrage of bullets from an especially relentless Ruin Guard, were it not for your hastily constructed screen of ice. It was the same for the precocious kid who'd gotten herself trapped in a bubble from a particularly peeved hydro slime.

You remember. Several years ago, you'd returned to the ruins of your home village looking the part of a stranger. Maybe being dyed in all the colors of divinity didn't do you any favors in that regard, but still.

Even as the few remaining inhabitants clung to the past, unable to leave the shattered remnants of their home — you couldn't find a single one who could remember your name.

When you returned to Master, shrouded within the warmth of her wings spread wide — the closest thing you'd get to a mother's embrace — you'd desperately wanted to erase the visit from your memory. Forget, as you had been forgotten.

Ah, but... years later, when you finally bring yourself to return to the place with Yun Jin, slinging supposedly heavy tools over your shoulder to aid in Liyue's latest reconstruction effort... the weight across your shoulders seems to lighten, somehow — and in more ways than one.)

Yun Jin is such a good storyteller, you realize. Her voice is animated as she speaks, eyes sparkling like a vein of gold in a seam of coal: shining against the dark curtain of her hair.

She infuses flavor, even into the mundane — whether it's waxing about a traveler aimlessly wandering through the snow, or a gullible sailor getting herself banned from feeding the local population of stray cats, her words are bright against the bleak backdrop of the banal: giving it new life.

She likes to burst into song whenever inspiration strikes — stepping into her characters' shoes wherever she pleases. Not like anyone can tell her voice apart from the constant clamor of the Harbor, anyway — it's lost to the sea of noise. More often than not, it tends to snap you out of spiraling — dragging you from the depths of darkening thoughts with the sheer sun-kissed warmth of her voice.

She never orders the same drink twice, and you're starting to think the teahouse owner's expanded the menu for her sake alone. ... You can't really see the appeal of valberry-violetgrass tea, no matter how novel the combination may seem.

And yet — when she looks at you like that, well — how can you refuse a cup of your own?

At dawn, when Yun Jin hears a symphony of swallows

perched on her eaves, she likes to think she is joining in harmony. Come winter, she finds herself missing their merry melodies — even if it means she's allowed one more hour of sleep once they leave.

She listens to rock and roll when the elders aren't breathing down her neck because it sounds like freedom, and feeds them increasingly convoluted excuses to attend her dear friend Xinyan's concerts. One of these days, she swears she'll drag you along with the promise of front-row seats.

You've hardly been Yun Jin's acquaintance for more than a few months, but you're beginning to realize: the colors she's painting your life are so much brighter than you've ever imagined.

She doesn't doll you up in the lavish robes of idolatry, keeping her distance as one would with a hallowed god — but links your arms with hers, instead. Draws you closer, side-eyeing pickpockets with a sharp smile, and cuts through the crowd with the practiced acuity of a swordswoman with her blade. Life would not be the same without her unpredictable palette.

When all her colors unfurl before you, like plum blossoms carrying the promise of spring, well. What can you do but watch, enraptured?

You can't bring yourself to look away.

V.

"I think I'd like to hear your story, one of these days. Or – one of yours, at least. It's only fair, you know? Given that you already know mine."

There's a note of curiosity in your voice when you speak, sitting across from Yun Jin: surrounded by the hazy coils of cigarette smoke and a sea of sound.

Her favorite open-air tea house sits in a smart location – close enough to the shore to catch the soft susurrus of the ocean waves, but far enough from the fishermen's market to avoid being assaulted by the unappetizing scent of freshly slaughtered salmon and sardines.

Here, crimson lanterns dangling above the tables sway like drunken dancers with a sudden wind; your glass gleams like the shine of a serpent's scales in the day's dwindling light.

A gaggle of old men engage in a few heated rounds of mahjong in a far-off corner of the open-air courtyard; you've never heard the click of tiles sound so aggressive before.

Sunlight's falling across Yun Jin's face in fractals, making her look – ah, how can you put it to words?

Ethereal, maybe – or perhaps divine. (You've spent much of your childhood surrounded by adepti, so you know what you're talking about.) Yun Jin looks like she has stepped out from a painting, brought to life from elegant brushstrokes and so much ink.

A tall glass is cradled in your palms, radiating warmth; meanwhile, Yun Jin chose a more traditional cup, delicate and fashioned from porcelain. You're six sips into an experimental blend – silkflower steeped with qingxin to counteract the sweetness, apparently – but you can't bring yourself to smother the stars in Yun Jin's eyes.

(Whoever thought this blend was a good idea should be thrown in the harbor.

Oh, sure – points for the presentation. A tall glass filled with dried, shriveled silkflowers is instantly revitalized with the addition of hot water, blooming before your eyes. Still, they're more brief than beautiful; the tea is far more fragrance than flavor. The only thing this tea is counteracting is your blood pressure, and maybe your newfound preference for sweets.

Not that you really have any room to complain. Really, you'll take anything over the taste of herbs gathered in haste, having to run all over the mountain just for a

few bitter mouthfuls. Calling it breakfast would be generous on a good day.

... Ah, you're really hoping it wasn't Yun Jin who came up with this... cursed combination. You're grown far too fond of her to go dunking her in sub-zero seawater, see. You would rather swallow three bouquets' worth of qingxin than lay a hand on a woman who brings light to all the people she meets — you included.)

“My story? I must admit, the idea... is rather novel. I’ve spent all my life telling other people’s stories, after all.” Yun Jin tucks a ink-black strand of hair behind her ear, considering. “I suppose the time has come for me to pen the pages of my own. Ah, that is — I do have a tendency to ramble, so we may be here for quite some time. If that is fine with you...?”

Yun Jin’s voice flows smoothly as the lacquer of a quality inkstick: brushstroke by brushstroke, verse by verse. You could listen to its lyrical cadence for hours.

“Of course. Yun Jin, I’ll have you know — I’m not going anywhere. So... go on, then. I’m listening.”

And so Yun Jin speaks of long gone days, reminiscing over the mischief she made in her youth with an unrepentant smile.

(It’s a delight — that devilish smile of hers, spreading from ear to ear; she brings to mind the image of a cat readying to pounce. You want to watch that smile unfurl across her face more and more, slow and sweet as the sunrise. At the sight of it, all the stares that haunt your figure seem to fall away.

Flowers gravitate towards the sun, after all. Her audience is no different — their eyes and ears are held captive by the star taking center stage: enthralled by the sheer, celestial radiance of her voice.

That playful grin is a challenge — the quicksilver gleam of a threat.

Something about it makes your heart race the same way it does before a fight: electricity zipping through your veins, setting you alight. It’s nothing like the polite, passive-aggressive little smiles she makes for show when her troupe members get on her nerves for still treating her like a little girl, even after all these years.)

Picture it: a young Director Yun on the run from her troupe’s nagging elders, promising Auntie Meng extra tips on belting techniques in exchange. With a wink, Meng-ayi swears to keep those conformist old grandpas distracted with another round of mahjong. More mora for her — according to Yun Jin, her skill at the game’s somewhat terrifying.

Imagine: Yun Jin, desperate to cure her latest bout of writer's block, wandering from sailor to sailor in search of new material: fabric to weave her fables with more vivid, varied cloth. Panning through the silt-laden waters — hunting for an elusive vein of gold — she bargains with merchants from Snezhnaya to Fontaine for inspiration.

A song for a story, she proclaims to anyone willing to spare a second to her whims. In a bustling harbor, who has time to listen to the lilting voice of a little girl? Her voice is drowned out by the crashing waves and the orders barked to toiling dockworkers, straining to load a fleet's worth of ships with their rightful cargo.

But years of struggling through spear forms at six has forged her once pliant personality into unbending steel. She starts to memorize their schedules, instead — to synchronize her lunch break with theirs.

There's a flask of warm honey water in her pack, along with a notepad and her favorite pen. She sings until it is halfway empty, until her mind fills with innumerable narratives.

They spill from her mind, overflowing onto once barren pages: the tale of a fair maiden singing on a lofty riverbank, hands clasped together in hopes that her voice would reach the ears of her beloved: a soldier serving far away.

As you listen to Yun Jin's story draw to a close, you realize that you're leaning forward: enraptured by her mundane stories of ordinary people — of herself.

You listen to her recount a life you can only dream of living: a child following in her mother's footsteps, making her beam with pride.

(... Your heart aches something fierce, for a moment. Is your mother watching you, even now? You think of the gleam of her blade in the dark, a bright song of steel and salvation. The crushing weight of two empty graves. Will she wait until the day death comes knocking at your door, welcoming you with the warmth of her embrace?)

Now that you're here, you can't help but notice the red flush to Yun Jin's cheeks from the cold. It makes you want to drape a scarf over her shoulders, so she's cradled in that gentle warmth. Yun Jin is far too kind a person to deserve being cast into winter's chill; you don't want her to endure the icy wind's inhospitable welcome all on her own.

(It was cold enough this morning that it was a trial to even drag yourself from the warmth of your rented quarters' covers, never mind make it down the street. If you, a *cryo user*, is complaining about the cold, then you can't imagine what it must be like for someone with far less immunity to such frigid extremes.

Ah, you're growing far too used to these mortal comforts — sleeping in late, that is. You used to wake at daybreak to patrol the mountain paths. And yet — you find yourself not wanting to return to the ache of isolation that you know will haunt you, once you return to those hallowed peaks.

Would it really hurt to stay in this city of light for just a little longer?)

You notice how the tang of seawater, carried on a glacial wind, throws her smooth syntax into disarray as she breathes it in — savoring the sharp bite of brine. You stifle a laugh at the way her half-drunk tea sits in her cup, sloshing this way and that like a pendulum with her animated motions.

(After one particularly sweeping gesture, you start to wonder if her tea would make it out of this dramatic tale unscathed. ... That's what good reflexes are for, you suppose. Even so, you still refill her cup with the provided ceramic teapot, peering at it with a watchful eye.)

As you listen to Yun Jin's story draw to a close, you realize that you don't want this to end. Even if this chapter of her life is reaching its conclusion, Yun Jin's story is only beginning.

You trace the rim of your glass with a sigh, realizing:

that you'd like to be included in the pages of her narrative for quite a while, if she'll allow it. You would very much like to reach across the table and close the distance, to press a kiss to the back of her hand like a promise — or maybe a selfish request.

Stay with me for another sunrise. Linger just a little longer in this city of light with me. For two tomorrows, or ten. No — for a thousand, if you'll have me.

Even if it means you would be a shrike among songbirds — you know who you are, now, and you are not ashamed.

VI.

SONGBIRD

I scaled a mountain once, as a child.

CRANE

And how was it?

SONGBIRD

Awful. A delightful view is only so refreshing when you can hardly feel your legs, no? I swore that would be the last.

CRANE

And yet here you are.

SONGBIRD
Here I am.

CRANE

... Care to elaborate, then? I'm curious – on why you would accompany me, if you detest climbing mountains so much.

Not... not that I dislike your company, or anything. Far from it, really.

SONGBIRD

Well – you see... with you by my side, no summit seems insurmountable. My resolve pales in comparison.

In fact, I would much rather catch an air current than scale such lofty cliffs, even after having endured such rigorous training as a child.

I admire that steadfast determination of yours, truly. I think I should tell you that more.

CRANE

... Shouldn't I be saying that to you?

SONGBIRD

Oh, Shenhe. I don't write operas for just anyone, I'll have you know. I think I would scale Mt. Aocang, if only for your sake. Hm... oh!

Come to think of it... I would very much like to meet this Cloud Retainer you speak of so fondly, as one does for a particularly nagging aunt.

CRANE

...

SONGBIRD

Oh, don't look at me like that – I have never heard you speak so much of someone in one sitting, even if it is filled with complaints.

CRANE

I... don't know if I deserve your kindness, Yun Jin. But... a particularly nagging aunt, huh. I suppose you're not too far off the mark.

Well. Perhaps we'll pay her a visit another time. I don't think she's quite forgiven me for incinerating that one blueprint of hers...

SONGBIRD

Incinerating...?!

[teasing] Shenhe, are you holding out on me? What, do you have a second vision up your sleeves?

CRANE

...? No. I was cold and trying to cuddle a pyro slime. The blueprint was already illegible from ink stains, so I thought I'd use it for kindling.

SONGBIRD
Shenhe...

CRANE
Wh... what is it.

SONGBIRD

Please. Never change. The way your mind works, the way you view the world... I think it's quite refreshing. I'll take it over the passive-aggressive pampering of my troupe any day.

CRANE

No one... has ever told me that before. I... Thank you. You've helped me make up my mind on something.

In fact, I think I know where I'm heading next. You can accompany me, if you'd like.

CRANE

[whispered; reverent]

... After all my years of wandering, I think... I've finally found my guiding star.

VII.

Stepping out from the haze of clouds that wrap around Mt. Aocang's peaks makes you feel sixteen again, even if a decade has passed since you've last returned.

Winter is slowly loosening its white-knuckled grip over the world. It's not miserably cold enough to warrant the fluffy, cat-patterned scarf Yun Jin had insisted on looping around your shoulders.

Still. You could never deny her anything, not when she looked at you like that — like you'd left a trail of constellations to guide her home through an endless night, or maybe parted all the clouds in the sky to reveal the moon's watchful eye, to her starry-eyed delight.

You thought returning to the place you once called home would only bring back bitter memories, haunting you like the haze that tends to linger after a particularly bad dream. But — something about the way the morning light hits the golden flowers of your village, setting them ablaze... brings back memories of brighter days, instead.

You cleared things up with Tang-popo not long ago, which means that persistent old granny's been trying to strong-arm you into paying for fried tofu at half-price.

To counteract this, you've started to develop a habit of leaving your full payment on the counter when she's distracted with another customer, tucking your take-out container beneath one arm, and sprinting around the corner to make a tactical retreat.

It's strangely a relief to find that the years haven't dulled the sharpness of A-Ling's tongue – she tells you that you look like either a tax evader or an idiot when doing this.

She says, as she somehow manages to throw Granny Tang off your trail with a blatantly obvious attempt at deflection. Closest thing to an apology you'll get from her, you suppose. (Truth be told, the kid's far too honest for her own good.)

You tell her that you don't particularly care for the opinion of an eighteen-year-old, at this point, but you ruffle her hair in thanks.

Still, you're not going easy on her (not that you ever have) in your next sparring session, as payback for calling you a fool. *Really, you better not have been slacking on your sword stances – or all that time I spent grilling you would've gone to waste.*

~

There's a pleasantly warm bowl being pressed into your hands by Uncle Mingjun before you can argue otherwise, then a set of disposable chopsticks. You can't help but stare. It's still steaming, so he must have been waiting for you to arrive.

Lopsided slices of ham sit atop slender noodles, thin as the hairs on a dragon's beard. They've fragmented a little in the process of being pulled into shape, sprinkled with slivers of green onion to compensate.

... Dragon's beard noodles, huh. No matter how many times she served it at the kitchen table, your mother never tired of the taste. It's a family favorite, though few have come close to even mastering the recipe. The noodles have to be pulled by hand several times to thin them to perfection, and it's overall a pain to put together.

“Mingjun-shushu. It's been a while, hasn't it. ... You don't owe me anything, you know. Also, what if I had just finished dinner?”

“Long time no see, A-He. And – at least allow me to make up for lost time. Besides, you're not fooling anyone. I just heard your stomach growling five minutes ago.”

... It's been such a long time since you've been called A-He. He's one of the few people left in this world who know you by your childhood nickname, after all. And isn't that a lonely thought?

The heat of the broth, even if it's a little blander than

expected, is a relief against the biting cold of a late winter night. Sure, the onions are a little soggy, and maybe the ham's slightly crispy from being burnt — but it's been years since anyone's cooked a meal for you with such painstaking care.

... It has nothing on the artistry of Wanmin Restaurant's dishes, or the savoriness of a street vendor's snacks, but... it's so warm. It sets your heart alight with the strangest feeling — something like soft, sepia-toned nostalgia, intertwined with a sharp pang of grief.

You close your eyes. You don't want him to see you on the verge of tears, so you whisper the words like a spell, instead: fragile like the forgiveness he never allows himself, dissipating into the ice-cold air like an incantation.

“It tastes like home.”

~

Spring has come, and with it a fragile hope that dares to bloom — fluttering like so many petals in the wind.

Replacing rotting wood with finished planks feels like patching up a wound that's festered for far too long; flowers are starting to unfurl across once haunted graves. Sowing lavender seeds in the place of uprooted

weeds... feels like forging bravely onwards, turning your face to the promise of halcyon skies.

Even the plum tree you thought would never blossom again, crushed under the weight of endless snow, has surprised you with its pale, blushing pink petals in full bloom. Even after a brutal winter, they've always been the first flowers to unfurl in spring.

“Do you know what the plum blossom represents, Shenhe?”

Yun Jin is dusting dirt off her gardening gloves, her tightly bound hair steadily unwinding further and further with each hour of work. Her cheeks are red from exertion, and yet there's a faint note of mirth in her voice — as if she already knows the answer.

(In some way or another, you've been dragged into readying your hometown's soil for harvests yet to come. You reasoned that either Yun Jin had suddenly become infatuated with gardening, or she wanted to tag along with you to revisit your home. ... Likely the latter.)

You're not looking any better; you're wiping sweat from your brow, but remember too late to remove your soiled gloves. You're five seconds from flopping on the ground like a dying fish, but still perk up at the question — eager for a distraction.

“Hope and new beginnings. ... I only know this because they’re my favorite flower.”

“Yes. They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” Yun Jin meets your eyes with a steady gaze and a sly smile when she speaks, clearly turning her back to the flowers. So that’s the game she’s trying to play, huh? She’s not even trying to be subtle.

You can’t help but smile. There’s a reason why spring is your favorite season, after all. Even if its flowers never last very long, their sweet fragrance still lingers. Carried on a vernal wind, their perfume’s a perennial vow: that they will return again and again, year by year.

So you press a promise to stay awhile to Yun Jin’s cheeks, just like this, leaning close enough to catch a hint of her perfume. You laugh, breathless, as Yun Jin leaves an oath on your lips in return.

Even if the sojourn of spring may be brief, you think you’ll remember this moment forever.





A Lesson in Leisure Time

by Seraphina | ship: Jean/Lisa

content tags: N/A

Lisa reclines in her chair, her legs crossed elegantly, and an ornate teacup clasped in her hands. There's a single sip of tea remaining, barely warm now, and Lisa finishes it with a smile, enjoying the lingering floral note it leaves behind on her tongue. The moon is bright tonight, illuminating her library without the need for candles. It's a rather romantic atmosphere, or it would be if a certain somebody wasn't working late. Again. Lisa places her teacup aside and rises with a stretch to retrieve her waylaid wife.

Opening the door to the Acting Grand Master's office, Lisa swallows the jovial greeting on her lips at the sight of Jean. She's slumped over her desk with her eyes closed, the quill in her hand making a valiant escape attempt from her lax grip. Lisa sighs in both exasperation and fondness before she clears her throat loudly.

Jean startles, almost knocking over her ink well in a desperate bid to appear awake. "Oh, Lisa," Jean says

stifling a yawn behind her hand, "I didn't notice you come in."

Lisa chuckles indulgently, "Well darling, that's probably because that paperwork of yours put you right to sleep. I was afraid to let you sleep hunched over like that, so I woke you before you could strain your neck." Jean flushes an adorable shade of pink and opens her mouth, likely to deny her sleepiness, but Lisa continues, "Sweetheart, do you remember the game of cards we played last month."

Lisa's favorite wrinkle appears on Jean's brow as she frowns at the sudden change in subject. "Yes, of course," Jean answers. "You beat me fair and square."

Lisa stifles a grin. Jean had been the only one playing fair that night, but she's hardly going to correct her now. "A lucky hand," she lies easily. "But more importantly, darling, do you remember what I won?"

"You won..." Jean trails off, her lips tightening as she tries to get her tired mind to focus. "You won a day where I do everything you want."

"That's right, sweetie, and I'm claiming my prize today. We're going home right now—" Jean opens her mouth to protest, but Lisa talks right over her, "We're going straight to bed and when we wake up, we'll take the whole day off."

Jean looks delightfully horrified. “You said you were claiming your prize today,” she says, visibly perking up, “So that means either we go home now, or we take the day off tomorrow, but not both. I remember the stakes clearly and you only get one day.”

“What time is it, sweetheart?” Lisa asks lightly and enjoys the widening of Jean’s eyes as they take in the face of the grandfather clock against the wall.

“After midnight,” Jean says in a dejected tone.

“That’s right,” Lisa agrees cheerfully. “That means my day has already started. Now, up you get.” She presses a kiss to Jean’s pouty lips and then drags her wife towards home with a whistle on her lips.

~

In a pleasing turn of events, Lisa wakes before Jean the next morning. That means Lisa gets to snuggle closer to her wife, enjoying the warmth of her body and the warmth of Jean’s deep, even breath against her face until the light of the sun finally stirs Jean. She wakes with a lazy stretch, eyes blinking sleepily open before they land on Lisa.

“Good morning, darling,” Lisa greets before kissing her innocently on the lips. She runs her fingers through Jean’s unbound hair, smoothing back a few

errant strands from her face. Jean leans into her touch like a contented cat. “Are you ready to enjoy your day off?”

“I guess,” Jean says then frowns thoughtfully. “But I’m not sure what people do with a whole day off,” she admits.

“Well, then it’s a good thing you have me to guide you,” Lisa responds with a giggle. “Let’s get up then, we’ll start with breakfast.” Lisa slides from the warmth of their bed and Jean follows eagerly.

~

They walk hand in hand down Mondstadt’s main street, returning the easy greetings from the shop owners before stopping at the Good Hunter. Lisa’s thumb draws random shapes on Jean’s palm while she entertains them both with the story of her latest book recovery. Sara brings them their regular orders and makes small talk with them until another customer calls her attention away.

When their plates are clean and Lisa is enjoying the last few sips of her tea, Jean finally asks, “So, what’s on the schedule for today?”

Lisa smiles indulgently, “Sweetie, we don’t need a schedule on our day off.”

Jeans looks adorably confused, “Oh. I guess that wouldn’t be very relaxing, would it?” she asks, scratching the back of her neck. “So, I guess we just—” Jean trails off and looks imploring at Lisa, who stares back guilelessly. “- go for a walk?” she finally finishes.

“A walk sounds lovely,” Lisa says fondly. “We could head towards Starsnatch Cliff and have a romantic picnic while looking out at the ocean.” At Jean’s nod, Lisa places enough Mora onto the table to cover their meal and rises, tucking Jean’s arm under hers.

The two women walk leisurely through the city gates enjoying the warmth of the midmorning sun on their skin and the soft cooing of the pigeons clustered on the bridge. The birds startle as they approach, flying away in a chorus of angry squawks echoed by the young boy feeding them.

“Hey! You scared away my pigeons!” Timmie scolds them as they approach.

“We’re very sorry we scared them away Timmie, but we need to get across the bridge. I’m sure they’ll be back in no time for more food,” Jean says earnestly.

Timmie looks stricken, “But Master Jean, I spent all my allowance already, and I’m out of food.” His face brightens with an idea, “Maybe you could get me some

more? You know, to make up for scaring them away.” Lisa is reluctantly impressed at his ability to tug on Jean’s heartstrings.

“We’re sorry Timmie,” Jean says, “but we have plans right now.” She sounds apologetic and Lisa almost laughs. Of course, Jean would take her suggestion as a firm plan, her wife was so bad at relaxing.

Lisa squeezes her elbow to get her attention. “Sweetie, we’re not in a rush,” she says gently. “We can go back to town to help Timmie then continue on our way.” Jean turns a bright smile in her direction and Lisa’s heart skips a beat. In the bright sunshine, Jean looks relaxed and happy, the bags under her eyes look less pronounced than usual and her eyes sparkle.

“Please, Master Jean!” Timmie begs.

“Okay, we’ll bring some wheat for your pigeons,” Jean says with an indulgent smile. Timmie cheers, jumping happily into the air as the two turn back towards Mondstadt.

Soon, the two are headed back towards the city gates, a bundle of wheat secured under Jean’s arm when they hear a cry. “Master Jean! Miss Lisa!” Quinn cries out, waving his hand wildly to get their attention. Jean raises her hand in greeting and Quinn leaves his cart



to jog over to them. “Are you heading out on patrol?” he asks.

“No, we’re just delivering some wheat to Timmie before heading to Starsnatch Cliff for a picnic,” Jean explains. “It’s our day off today.”

Quinn shifts from foot to foot as musses his hair. “Oh, never mind then. I don’t want to bother you on your day off,” he demurs, but even Jean can read his disappointed body language.

“Please tell us,” she encourages him. “We’re not in a rush.”

Needing little convincing, Quinn quickly explains the delay in his latest shipment. “Just one basket of apples and one basket of Sunsettia’s would save my business,” he finishes with a pleading look. With a glance at Jean’s expression, Lisa knows they’ll be gathering fruit for the next hour. Sure enough, Jean readily agrees to help and the two leave a grateful Quinn in the jealous clutches of Beatrice.

As soon as the pair is out of earshot, Jean turns to whisper in her ear. “I don’t know how he can be so oblivious,” she says conspiratorially. “Beatrice is there every day trying to get a date under the pretense of buying fruit. I don’t know how he doesn’t realize.” She laughs and Lisa turns incredulous eyes on her.

“Jean, sweetheart,” Lisa says with a fond giggle. “I sat in your office for hours every day for months to flirt with you, and you never noticed.”

Jean’s cheeks flush a light pink, and she clears her throat twice before responding. “Yes, well,” she says, “But I thought that was just how you talked to everyone.”

“Did you think I invited just anybody back to my apartment and offered to cook my famous Bolognese for them?” Lisa teases her wife. She’s rewarded with a darkening of the blush across Jean’s face, and Lisa delights in watching her stutter through a few aborted excuses before she’s spared from answering by a delighted Timmie. They relinquish the packet of wheat and set off with baskets tucked beneath their arms.

Before long, they come across a grove of fruit trees and Lisa makes herself comfortable on the grass, tucking her skirts daintily underneath her. While she’s settling, Jean grips the thickest branch of a nearby tree and pulls herself up with a soft grunt. Lisa takes a moment to appreciate the flex of her arms and the display of athleticism as Jean scrambles up into the tree. “You’re not going to help?” Jean asks from her perch.

“Climbing trees is more your thing, sweetie,” Lisa replies easily as she slips a book from her bag and

thumbs through the pages to find where she left off. "I'll just sit here and enjoy the sunshine while you collect the fruit."

Jean plucks a few apples before twisting herself higher through the branches. "What are you reading today?" she calls down to Lisa.

Lisa puts her finger to the page to mark her place as she answers Jean. "It's a light novel about a poor Liyuan fisherman who falls in love with an Adeptus. Would you like me to read it aloud while you work?"

Jean drops from the tree to stow her armful of fruits in the bucket before she walks over to Lisa. Pressing a kiss to her lips, Jean nods. "I would love that," she says before making her way back into the tree.

With a soft smile, Lisa flips to the first page, clears her throat, and begins. She reads while Jean steadily fills the baskets. When they cannot hold any more fruit, Jean comes to sit beside her, a shining, plump apple in her hand. Jean cuts it into sections, alternating between slipping a piece of fruit into her mouth and interrupting Lisa's storytelling by feeding her a slice. When the last section is gone, Lisa closes her book and leans forward to lick a drop of juice from the inside of Jean's wrist, delighting in the darkening of Jean's gaze.

The two make their way back to Mondstadt, Jean easily hefting both brimming baskets as she tells Lisa of childhoods spent scaling the foliage of her childhood home. The late afternoon sun is hot against her skin, and she lowers the brim of her hat to keep the glare from her eyes. When they approach Quinn's stall, Lisa notices a frazzled-looking Sara standing next to him, a frantic request for a delivery person on her lips. Lisa sighs when Jean volunteers them.

The rest of their day goes much the same. They've no sooner delivered Sara's order to Springvale when they're approached by an anxious-looking Draff and listening to his tale of missing pigeons. Once the pigeons have been chased home, and they turn back towards home themselves, they come across an adventurer trapped by a crude Hilichurl barrier. The pair ran errand after errand, performing good deed after good deed until the sun had dipped below the horizon and the soft light of the stars is visible.

Although it wasn't the relaxing day free from responsibilities Lisa had pictured, she can't deny that it's been pleasant. Jean's cheeks glow with the satisfaction of a day well spent, and her body language is relaxed. Lisa doesn't even feel a pang of disappointment as she lets go of her plans for a picnic. Perhaps they can pick up some ingredients and cook at home.

Jean guides them, but not towards their house, and Lisa groans when she recognizes the well-traveled route towards headquarters. "Sweetie," she begins, taking care to keep the exasperation out of her voice. "We agreed to no work for an entire day."

Jean tugs her forward by the hand. "Trust me?" she asks, and Lisa does. She refrains from asking as they pass Jean's office and the door to her library, she keeps quiet as Jean leads her up the winding staircase to the roof, and she only offers a token protest when Jean gestures for her to climb one of the towers. When she finally hauls herself up, she lets out a soft noise of pleased surprise.

A checkered flannel blanket covers the grey bricks, plates piled high with their favorite dishes from the Good Hunter cover a corner of the blanket surrounded by bottles of fresh fruit juice from Quinn's stall. There are various other small trinkets of thanks from the people they helped today, and Lisa is overcome with the urge to kiss Jean's cheek. "How did you find the time to do all this?"

Jean beams at her, proud. "Everybody we did a favor for asked what they could do for us in return. I mentioned we were having a picnic up here and could use the help setting it up. I'm rather pleased with how it turned out." Lisa sits down and pours them both a drink Jean talks, serving her wife with a smile on her face.

"You know," Lisa begins as they gaze up at the stars. "I thought I was teaching you how to take a day off, but it turns out I was learning about generosity from you instead."

Jean cocks her head, confused. "But we didn't do anything special today," she says and Lisa's heart clenches. Of course, Jean would think spending her entire day in service to others was nothing special. Lisa loves this beautiful, selfless woman more each day they spend together. "Well, shall we eat?" Jean suggests, already reaching for the plates and setting a vegetarian one in front of Lisa.

"I love you," Lisa says helplessly and smiles fondly when Jean returns the sentiment through a mouthful of food. As they eat together under the stars with their shoulders pressed together, Lisa vows to herself that the next time she cons Jean into taking a day off, they'll spend the whole day in bed.



Cover



DaaiZefU
🐦 DaaiZefU

Writing

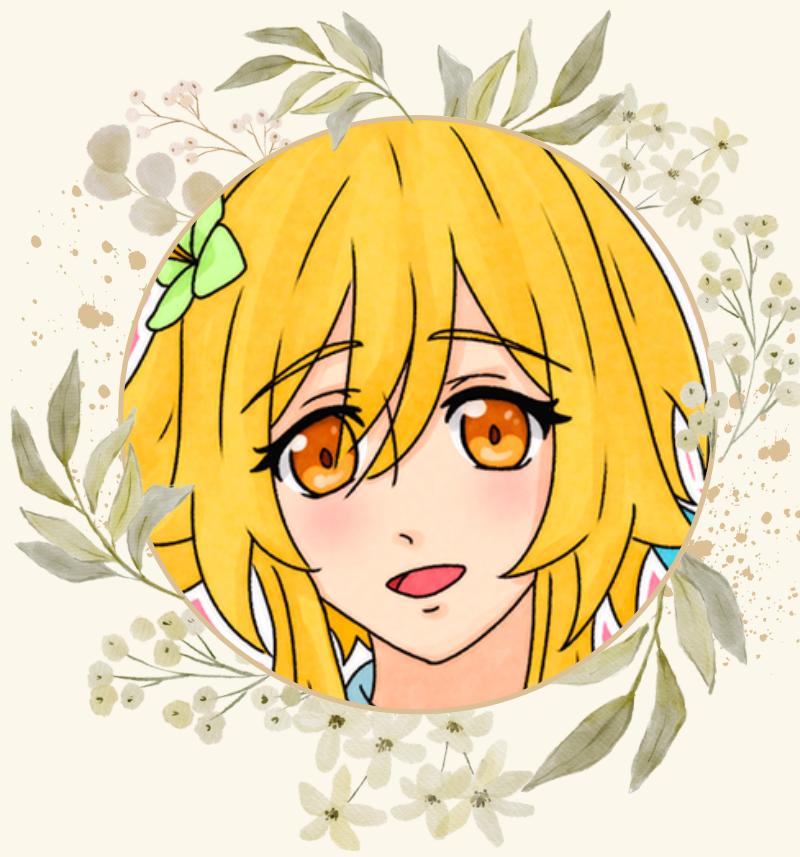


Ama
🐦 mochiamori_
﴿ amaethyst



Cadriona
🐦 Cadriona_M
﴿ Cadriona_M

Art



Kaonee_888
🐦 kaonee_888



Knightly
🐦 knightlybydesig
t knightlybydesign



Cat_unicreating
🐦 cat_unicreating
﴿ Cat_unicreating



crescenttwins
🐦 happinessdeceit
﴿ crescenttwins



Eternitas
🐦 gaytropywife



Midori
🐦 berrykittyo30
﴿ berrykittyo30



Mixedsnack Cho
🐦 mixedsnack



Sel



Mina
🐦 8bitdetective



Rii
🐦 riiunae
﴿ riiunae



Seraphina
﴿ Visct_Seraphina

Project Staff



Cat_unicreating
Layout Design
🐦 cat_unicreating
﴿ Cat_unicreating



crescenttwins
*Formatting, Graphics,
Organization & Outreach*
🐦 happinessdeceit
﴿ crescenttwins



Lixolu
*Outreach & Social
Media*
🐦 lixo_lu
﴿ lixo_lu



Red
*Concept, Initial
Organization*



Star
*Organization, Outreach &
Social Media*
🐦 starglimmermoon
﴿ starglimmermoonglow

Thank You

Thank you for downloading Sunstruck Blossoms: A SFW Genshin Impact Femslash zine! We hope that you enjoyed the incredible works of our creators as we celebrate femslash in Genshin Impact.

We'd like to thank everyone involved in making this zine come to life: Red for getting things started; Cat_unicreating, crescenttwins, Lixolu, and Star for making this project a reality; DaaiZefU for the wonderful cover art; and all of the fantastic contributors-- this project wouldn't exist without your amazing work!

Additional thanks to the members of the GI Femslash Server for your enthusiastic support and keeping us motivated! It is your camaraderie that allowed us to release not only this zine but its NSFW companion, Moonlit Blooms.

Lastly, we would like to thank everyone who's liked, shared, and otherwise supported the project. Thank YOU dear reader, and we hope you enjoyed this zine!

Sunstruck Blossoms

A SFW Genshin Impact Femslash Zine

This is a free, unofficial fanzine featuring characters, settings, and other material from Genshin Impact. The contributors are not affiliated with HoYoverse.

© All rights reserved by HoYoverse. Other properties belong to their respective owners.